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PLEASE NOTE

Screen shots and other artwork in this pdf have been downsampled and compressed. For the most accurate representation of game artwork please refer to your hard copy of PC Gamer.

THIS ED NOTE WAS WRITTEN ENTIRELY ON A NETBOOK

I can hear you now. "Big whup," you scoff. "That's what netbooks are for: sitting in coffee shops and clacking away on the keyboard while you sip on your precious soy latte. Bully for you for occupying a perfectly good table, like every other pretentious jack-a-ninny sitting next to you at the local Peet's."

How you wound me with your misguided assumptions. Nothing can be further from the truth! In fact, right now I'm sitting on my living room floor, it's 2 a.m., and we've got a hard deadline to finish shipping this issue in, oh, about 15 hours. Also, I'm sipping decaf green tea, thank you very much.

I'm also writing my monthly missive, which is noteworthy not because it's late (again!), or because I'm rambling on about myself (my favorite subject!)—but because I'm writing it on a nifty little machine that I bought specifically for work, and yet aside from a few meetings here or there where it came in handy, I've not used it for work at all. In fact, this month, my Asus 1000HE has become my gaming rig of choice, providing me with hours of unexpected joy saving my lawn from the undead in *Plants vs. Zombies*, embarking on an epic adventure in *The Longest Journey*, snacking on a sampling of recent puzzlers like *Crayon Physics Deluxe*, and click-click-clicking away on a quest for loot in *Diablo II*. And I can't forget all the brilliant browser-based indie projects I've been sampling like a fiend (check http://adamatomic.com).

It's a funny thing, considering that I've got four computers at home (two of which, admittedly, are Macs) and two at work, yet I've all but ignored them for my gaming pleasure. And that, my friends, is a testament to the scope of PC gaming. Sure, in comparison to our console brethren, we can boast about having the highest resolutions, the most precise control, the best user-created content, the greatest flexibility—but we can also be proud of the astounding range of gaming at the *low end* of the spectrum. On this tiny, underpowered system, I have access to a giant library of recent classics, casual pleasures and indie masterpieces. Indeed, the very limitations of my netbook has forced me to discover all kinds of gems, both contemporary and vintage.

Don't get me wrong: I won't be tossing out my other rigs in favor of this netbook. There's no way I'm missing out on this month's coverstar, for example—especially after hearing what Evan had to say about it in his world-exclusive first-ever playtest (p.44). But when I'm done with *Left 4 Dead 2*—or whatever other new game I might be playing in any given month—I suspect I'll be making a beeline toward this little baby for some quick-hit fun while sipping green tea on my living room floor at 2 a.m.

GARY

GARY STEINMAN, EDITOR IN CHIEF

7 other things Gary did with his netbook this month

1. Play *Feeding Frenzy 2* while pretending to listen to my wife tell me about her day.
2. Google "Gary Steinman is sexy" and find out there's a famous obstetrician with the same name.
3. Play *Plants vs. Zombies* because it's awesome.
4. Take fake notes during a ghoulishly boring game demo, simply to help stay awake.

5. Marvel at how much time can be wasted on those diabolical SpinTop search-and-find games.
6. Buy flowers online after getting in trouble for not paying attention to my wife.
7. Play more *Plants vs. Zombies* because it's awesome.

THE PLAYLIST 0809

GARY STEINMAN EDITOR IN CHIEF

OK, busted. It wasn't *all* netbook gaming this month. Gary managed to pull himself away from his itsy-bitsy 'puter to sneak in some sessions with the epicly awesome *And Yet It Moves* and the awesomely epic *Mass Effect*.

LOGAN DECKER EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Logan rummages through the unheralded games shelf: *Urban Chaos, Hamsterball, Sanitarium, Obsidian, Chaser, Carmageddon, 3D Ultra Pinball, Shadowman, Syndicate Wars* and *Oni* (if only the first few levels).

DAN STAPLETON REVIEWS EDITOR

He may die a lot, but otherwise Dan holds his own in regular *Demigod* sessions as Erebus the Vampire Lord. Plus, the *Fallout 3* DLC *Broken Steel* has provided a barely needed reason to revisit the Capitol Wasteland.

EVAN LAHTI ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Among Evan's achievements this month: using *Garry's Mod* ("the most wonderful dollhouse ever made") to construct a rocket built from headcrabs and direct a thrilling 1920s radio drama starring Dr. Breen and a grenade.

DAN FITZPATRICK LEAD DESIGNER

Dan's loving *Samarost 2*, 2005's web-based adventure game from the guys making *Machinarium*. The aesthetic is a soothing blend of old machinery, gnarled wood and calm acoustic sounds. Who says games are not art!

JOSH AUGUSTINE EPIC INTERN

Smarter than Spiderman, tougher than Batman, much cooler than Superman—it's The Conduit! Josh's alter ego has been battling criminal scum (and loveable cowboy robots) in *Champions Online*. Check out p.10 for more info!

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LETTERS

LETTERS
Sadly, the days of photographing editors chest-deep in bags of fan mail are long gone. And showing the mail counter of the *PC Gamer* inbox just isn't the same. But don't think we don't love to get mail. Talk to us at letters@pcgamer.com.

WIN!

THE FALLOUT 3 DLC TRILOGY!
Win this time, and you win *big*. We're giving away code sets for all three *Fallout 3* DLC packs: *Operation: Anchorage*, *The Pitt*, and *Broken Steel*. Just email contests@pcgamer.com with "ahoyvaultboy" in the subject line, and include your full name and mailing address in the message body. Contest ends Aug 7, 2009. See full contest rules on page 95.

CORRECTIONS
In our June issue, we misidentified the Technical Art Director of Borderlands as Brian Cousins. The Art Director's name is Brian Cozzens. We also mistakenly credited Cryptic as the developer of the *City of Heroes* Mission Architect tool. The correct developer is Paragon Studios. But everything else was right on the money.

WE DIDN'T WRITE THESE

I love the changes to *PC Gamer*! The little extra articles everywhere (for example, "Worlds Beyond WarCraft: Readers Bitch and MMOan") are a nice touch, and having developers write articles is fantastic! I love reading what goes on behind the scenes of game development. Thanks for all the hard work so lazy bums like me can just kick back and enjoy the gaming goodness. NICK

Don't sweat the detractors. Speaking as a veteran PC gamer (20+ years of experience), I love *PC Gamer*, not only because it's dedicated to the premier gaming platform (sorry, consoles just can't match the flexibility and horsepower of a PC), but also because it's consistently a great source for news, previews and reviews. While I hope columnists make a return appearance soon, I can't complain about the good stuff you're packing in, especially since *PC Gamer* is really the only way I can get a (PC) gaming fix here in Iraq. Thanks for the good work, and keep it up. SAM WHITE

CAN'T WIN 'EM ALL

The new art direction is distasteful. I sometimes have a hard time reading the magazine because of the lack of coherent flow, and the way color and shapes are thrown haphazardly across the page. BRYAN BAKER

I purchase *PC Gamer* to read columns. I cannot, with good conscience, continue to read this magazine as it is only a shell of its former self. TANNER WILSON

I hate *PC Gamer*. FRANCIS

UN-STEAMLY BEHAVIOR

While I agree with many of the positive things you have to say about Steam, the service has a significant flaw that you should address before your next full-on tonsil-hockey session: that Steam violates my rights as a consumer to actually "own" the property I have purchased. Steam games—even those games I have purchased at retail that use Steam for license management—can't be traded. This is wrong. When I pay $50 for game, it should be mine to do with what I want, just like a book, a CD, a hammer or anything else. That's the advantage of console systems. If I am paying full price for a retail version (*Empire: Total War* and *Dawn of War II*—I'm looking at you), when I finish playing it I should be able to trade it or sell it. GENE

Gamers ought to be able to buy, sell and trade their games, but it isn't clear that anybody's legal rights are being violated when digital distribution services, including Steam, don't make that an option.

At issue here is what's known as the "first-sale doctrine," a well-established legal principle that says that a publisher can't sell you a book and then prevent you from selling or giving it away to somebody else as long as no additional copies are made. But software companies—including game publishers—claim that they license, instead of sell, their products, and that this gives them the right to restrict the resale of their products even when no copy is made. Courts have decided on both sides of the issue.

We admire Stardock's Goo service for allowing gamers to sell their game licenses back to the publisher (see "DRM in Retreat," July 2009), but this is of course the exception rather than the rule. Still, is the used-game market really an "advantage" of the console scene? Because you're basically paying up front for giant, expensive DRM machines, and once you've got that, you then pay $10-$20 extra for every single game compared to the price of the PC version. So no wonder the market for used console games is so big—who could afford all those games if it wasn't?

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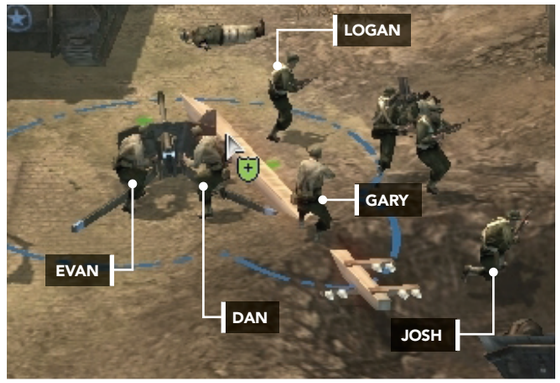
"Sending a nameless, faceless grunt into a wall of bullets isn't tough."



On second thought, perhaps we ought to discourage this kind of thing.

Sending a nameless, faceless, personality-free grunt into a wall of bullets isn't tough. But if these soldiers were people, how easy would this be? While the execution is up to the creators (penning letters to the deceased's families? Public outcry over your tactics?), there is vast potential in tugging at an armchair general's heartstrings. PATRICK STUMBERG

Armchair General Dan Stapleton responds:

MORAL MINORITY

Morality systems are a growing (and not entirely unwelcome) trend in games. What I find interesting is that this is almost exclusive to RPGs, when it seems far more appropriate to RTSes.

A true general has to become inured to sending his men to their deaths. As Grant and Sherman learned in the Civil War, sometimes you need to just flood the battlefield with men until you overwhelm your opponents with sheer numbers, losing countless men in the process.

Of course, any RTS gamer will do this in a heartbeat.

Some RTSes, like Company of Heroes *and* World in Conflict, *do make a strong effort to give you a feeling of connection to your troops by portraying the average grunt as a real person in the campaign cutscenes. But that's likely as close as you're going to get, since spending more time writing letters to imaginary grieving families than you do blowing stuff up isn't any fun. Still nobody's stopping you from giving names to every one of your troops.*

PRTSCN

Brendan M. of Chevy Chase, Maryland didn't tell us how Zoey came to find herself lodged in the ceiling up to her waist. Maybe Louis came up from behind and gave her a fanny slap and a playful "boo!" during a tense moment. Maybe she was standing on the low end of the see-saw when Boomer came bumbling in. Or it could be just a fresh take on the old lampshade-on-the-head party classic.

Send your favorite high-resolution screenshots to the PC Gamer Historical Archives (letters@pcgamer.com) and you could become immune to infection from zombie bites for three to six whole hours!

CHATLOG

I'll suggest three X-Com tips for you guys. Avoid playing at night! Daylight is always better than flares. Once you start encountering psychic attacks, just sack those that are vulnerable. Early on you want to make laser rifles and just auto-shoot with them. And yes, X-Com definitely needed a tutorial.
Juicebowl (from the podcast forum)

In the case of Demigod, Stardock and GPG were screwed over by Gamestop, and as a result there were unanticipated levels of piracy. But the launch problems have been solved for the vast majority of people, and Stardock should be commended for responding to and fixing these issues so quickly.
dLMN8R (from the podcast forum)

When I finally bought my own computer and games, the manuals were rapidly worn through. I guess it doesn't help that some of my first purchases were Alpha Centauri and StarCraft, both of which had absolutely awesome manuals. Sure, e-manuals are handy, but they just don't have the same feel.
RainShine (from the podcast forum)

CHAMPIONS ONLINE

STRAP ON YOUR TIGHTS! PC GAMER'S DAN STAPLETON AND JOSH AUGUSTINE SPEND A FULL WEEK FIGHTING CRIME!

When called upon to be a hero, you don't hesitate. You jump into the action. At least that's the way we see it at *PC Gamer*, so when Cryptic Studios invited us on a tour of the *Champions Online* beta as they gear up for an early September release, we ran for the nearest phone booth and squeezed into our shiniest spandex. Soon enough, we were off on an epic adventure, and now our very own dynamic duo is back with a full report.

But first, an origin story: Five years ago, upstart developer Cryptic launched *City of Heroes*, the first superhero-themed MMO in a genre dominated by swords and sorcery. Now, though *CoH* still thrives under NCSoft and Paragon Studios, Cryptic has moved on to their superhero MMO version 2.0: *Champions Online*, based on a little-known but well-established pen-and-paper role-playing gaming universe. The game is still rough around the edges (if it weren't, it'd be out already), but after a full week of adventuring, Dan and Josh got a good sense of what the final release will be like.

HEROES ARE MADE, NOT BORN

Champions makes an excellent initial impression by showcasing one its best features first: a character editor that lets you create nearly any superhero your brain can conjure. Far from the usual choice between green or brown rags and a dull butter knife or a broken twig, your hero starts off looking awesome, and he stays that way until you decide it's time to change (loot doesn't affect your appearance unless you want it to). It's not quite *Spore*-level flexibility, but with a ridiculously large wardrobe that lets you pick and combine elements from ninja, robot, insect or a dozen other themes, *Champions* is the next best thing.

Rather than traditional character classes, here you pick from one of nine preset "frameworks," such as hard target or intimidator, which are defined not by rigid power sets but by their starting levels in each of eight statistics (constitution, endurance, strength, dexterity, intelligence, ego, presence and recovery). So by making choices when you level up and equip loot that boosts those stats, you effectively create your own class with unique stats. Cryptic's first challenge before release will be figuring out a way to make this complex system accessible and intuitive to new players.

We each created several heroes, but the ones that we played the most with were Dan's Arm Of The Law, a ninja-like swordsman with a fedora and a cybernetic arm, and Josh's Conduit—an old, decrepit lightning rod of a man that runs around on all fours as electricity lashes out of his body at anything nearby. ▶▶

Champions' character editor lets you create nearly any superhero your brain can conjure

Super-customization: If your character uses a ranged attack, you get to choose whether it shoots out of your eyes, forehead, chest, palms or fists, and you can pick the colors for all the effects.

VITALS
DEVELOPER Cryptic
PUBLISHER Atari
RELEASE September
LINK champions-online.com

HALL OF HEROES/ ROGUES' GALLERY

■ Along the bottom of these pages you'll find dozens of examples of the amazingly varied heroes and villains, but these only scratch the surface of what you can make in a few minutes of tweaking. Just pushing the "randomize" button can generate some amazing characters!

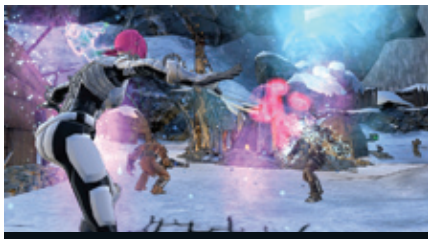
IN THE MIDST OF CRISIS

New characters start off in one of *Champions*' crisis zones—a small section of the huge Millennium City zone isolated by a force field. It's here we learned the basics of super-heroism while battling an invasion by an insectoid alien race called the Qualar. Most of the early stuff was typical MMO standbys: kill, FedEx, find items and escort citizenry. But the climactic quest, in which you help a major hero named Ironclad defend and repair a cannon that'll launch him as a projectile to destroy the alien mothership, was an open public quest that all nearby heroes could join in and assist. With the exception of a few major encounters and supervillain lairs, nearly all the quests we played were set in the open rather than in private instances, so you rarely feel like you're alone in a crowd of lifeless NPCs.

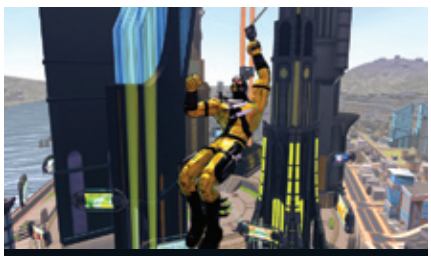
The pace of combat is much faster and more intense than most MMOs. Rather than waiting for your abilities to recharge, you rapidly slash and/or pew-pew-pew away at enemies using basic attacks with virtually no cooldown timer. These minor attacks counter-intuitively *build up* your endurance bar to power your more potent attacks. Adding an extra dimension, you have the opportunity to block incoming heavy attacks by holding shift when enemies telegraph a move, making defense a more active part of battle than usual.

After the final battle of the crisis zone inside the Champions' base of operations alongside Defender (the Captain America of this universe), you get to pick your first new powers. The Arm Of The Law picked up a grenade from the gadgeteer skill tree (you can pick any power from any tree to create a unique, multi-discipline hero build), and Conduit chose an electric area-of-effect ability that zapped all nearby enemies. More importantly, they earned travel powers. It was a difficult choice, with everything from flight to burrowing, teleportation and even a flying surfboard to pick from. The Arm was intended as a low-powered Batman-esque hero, so he chose the agility power to make him run faster and jump higher (but not *as* fast or as high as super speed or super jump) and take every opportunity to do a backflip. Meanwhile Conduit abandoned all logical sense and chose a Spider-Man-style swinging power that, while more difficult to control with any precision, was pretty awesome to watch.

We explored zones set in a huge city, a desert, a frozen tundra and a lush jungle. There's also a late-game zone that takes place under water, but we didn't level high enough to get there—yet.



Just like the real Canada, *Champions*' Canadian zone is covered in ice, snow and brain-hungry zombies controlled by magical shamans.



The swinging travel power grapples the sky if there are no convenient buildings, but we'll let that slide since it's a great way to get around.

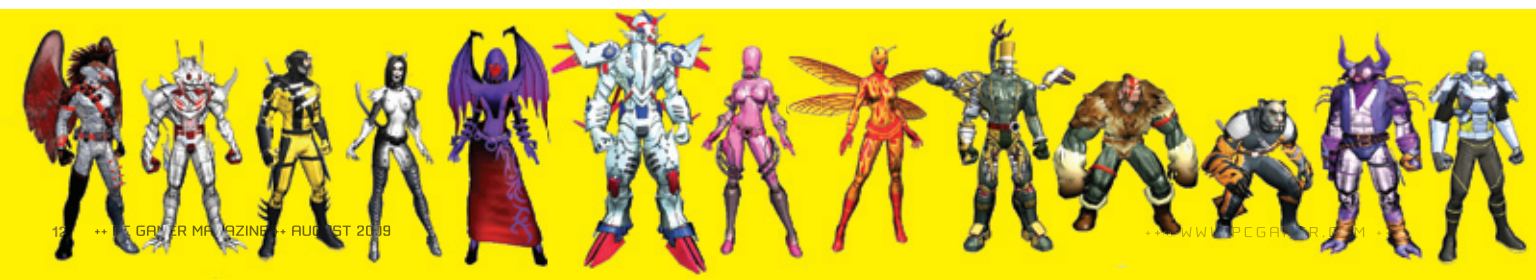
ADVENTURE ZONES

Exiting the Champions' headquarters to an end-of-*Star-Wars*-like award ceremony, we were given a choice between two helicopters. One led to a frozen Canadian tundra, the other to an area of the Nevada desert area known as the Atomic Wasteland—both zones cater to heroes at level five through 14. Arm and Conduit chose heat over cold, entering another crisis zone that pit our heroes against legions of radioactive mutants. We beat them back, primarily through a series of kill and collect quests, finally defeating a powerful mutated military officer in a small instance. Suddenly, the killer mutants were replaced with a thriving military base called Project Greenskin, full of quest-giving NPCs devoted to resolving the mutant threat. Beyond Greenskin's protective walls, the Wasteland was huge, consisting of many distinct regions that were inhabited not just by mutants but also cowboy ghosts, robots, aliens and more.

> The pace of combat is much faster and more intense than most MMOs

We spent a smaller amount of time exploring the Canadian zone with alternate characters—enough to run some quests involving a plane crash with survivors who bore an uncanny resemblance to the cast of *Lost*, and we battled mystical shamans and snow zombies.

Unlike *City of Heroes*, which was criticized for its simplicity, *Champions* really loads you up with options by the time you hit double-digit levels. Lots of loot, crafting (there are several options based in science, munitions, sorcery, etc.), offensive, defensive and balanced stances, multiple character builds and more make it a very complex game, but you can definitely get by without having to fiddle much if you don't want to. ▶▶



Giant boss enemies roam around zones. At our level, fighting them was instant death, but higher-level battles promise to be epic.

CHALLENGES TO CONQUER

After pouring in more than two dozen man-hours, our time with *Champions Online* has been overwhelmingly positive. We love the character editor, the comic-book look and feel, the humor and the fast-paced combat, but we still have a few concerns. Specifically, even 20 levels into the game and with one zone nearly completed, the quests seldom evolved past the standard MMO fare. They're fun, sure, but that owes more to the humorous pop culture-aware writing and the modern setting than interesting quest design. Flying into a base guarded by AA-cannons and blowing up 10 tanks by raining down lightning will *always* be more exciting than cutting 10 boars with a rusty letter opener, but a grind quest is a grind quest. The novelty of the superhero powers and the cel-shaded graphics might wear off eventually, and with just five (admittedly large and varied) zones currently in the beta, players looking for a long-term investment in a universe will fly to other MMOs to find their fix if Cryptic doesn't aggressively add new content and locales.

Still, the game manages to *present* quests in interesting new ways. At one point while swinging around Millennium City, Conduit stopped by City Hall and spotted the mayor about to give a speech to a crowd. The chief of police informed him that they'd received a tip about an assassination attempt on the mayor, so Conduit rushed to scan people in the crowd, uncovering the assassins. Then the chief gave him intel about snipers on eight nearby rooftops, ready to strike in the next 10 minutes.

Our conversation with Bill Roper, Cryptic's design director and executive producer on *Champions*, was very reassuring. Cryptic recently announced a six-week delay (it had been scheduled launch in July), and Roper's to-do list shows that the team is on top of the situation. "There were a lot of things that were right on the cusp of getting in, that now that we have the extra time, we say 'Oh great, we can get that in.' It's just a really, really good chance for us, in every way possible, to tighten up the game," he says. They're using the opportunity to improve the interface, balance the powers, add in new quests activated by going on patrol (for example, rescue a citizen from muggers and he rewards you with special quests), improve missions that beta players weren't enjoying as much, hone boss fight mechanics and add in two new crisis zones to the late-game areas. With Cryptic's excellent track record of regularly releasing large chunks of free content for *City of Heroes*, we're very optimistic about *Champions*' upcoming launch.

NEMESIS RISING

At level 25 Dan's alternate character, a telekinetic teleporter named The Headmaster, received a quest from Defender to stop a powerful arch-criminal from escaping from prison. That criminal would become his nemesis—the Joker to his Batman, Lex Luthor to his Superman. To create his new foe Dan was sent back into the character editor, where he whipped up a devilish hunchbacked delinquent calling himself the Class Clown. Despite the Headmaster's thwarting of the henchmen who organized the jailbreak and recapture of several other villains that were released as a diversion, the Clown himself managed to escape to plot his next crime spree. We've not seen the last of him.

Altair regrets choosing "fancy" over "plated."

ASSASSIN'S CREED II

A NEW HIT FOR ALTAIR

Repetition hurts. *Assassin's Creed* was one of the standout launches of its generation, a beautiful and innovative stealth action game set in the Holy Land at the time of the Crusades. The problem: The developer's ambition just wasn't matched by the game mechanics. Every mission began and ended the same way, with simple and prescribed minigames followed by a chase from the scene.

Assassin's Creed II is Ubisoft's answer to precisely that criticism. It's markedly more open and markedly more ambitious. Out go the Crusades: You're now playing a nobleman in Renaissance Italy, as the ideas and technology that will define western civilization are being laid down. There's a new degree of scale: Cities now stretch out further into the countryside. You'll be able to roam the hills of Tuscany rather than crisscross the narrow green corridors of the first game.

Best of all, Ubisoft promises that the repetition of the first outing will be broadly excised, replaced with 16 different mission types and more individually scripted events. Never again will you have to repeat the same "sitting on bench, pickpocketing and trailing" minigames for hour after hour.

Oh yeah: You can *fly*.

Key to *Assassin's Creed II* are the relationships you forge between characters and factions. You'll meet up with important religious leaders, kings and merchants (including the ancestral families of today's mafia), scientists (Leonardo da Vinci!) and downtrodden citizens (Ubisoft is keen to mention a sect of repressed courtesans), all of whom will help you with information, training and technology. Get on Leonardo's good side, and he'll lend you his hang-glider. Get on Leonardo's mates' good side, and they'll place fires throughout the cities, giving you thermal lift. Beats horseback!

Even Renaissance chicks love parkour.

VITALS **DEVELOPER** Ubisoft Montreal **PUBLISHER** Ubisoft **RELEASE** Fall **LINK** assassinscreed.com

the spy

The Spy once gripped onto a ledge of Ubisoft's HQ, sharing a thin inch of concrete with pigeons to listen for plans for **Splinter Cell 5**. He promised his wife he'd never go back there, but duty requires it. All The Spy knows is that after a long hiatus, Ubisoft's stealth-'em-up franchise is soon to return **in a game subtitled Conviction**. Sam Fisher will be turning even more Jack Bauer and emo than before, complaining about his dead daughter and shooting his best friend. The Spy has seen footage of a globe that zooms in on a Mediterranean island. How can *Splinter Cell* be set anywhere sunny? Before it went back to the drawing board, *SC5* was about hiding in plain sight, using crowds as cover. It sounded great, but then Ubisoft got nervous and pulled it back undercover. The Spy expects the theme to stay.

■

And while The Spy was dangling, using his patented ledge-o-grasp-o-motron, he heard some commotion. Ubisoft's people were angry that a video of their super secret **Beyond Good & Evil 2** game had leaked. The sequel to the sweet action adventure game is looking awfully **like a third-person Mirror's Edge**. Yes, The Spy is aware that's basically *Assassin's Creed*. The leaked movie shows Jade speeding through a city, dodging people and leaping up to a balcony before hurling herself at a helicopter. It does look good. Too good: the video is clearly a concept render. But the idea is interesting.

■

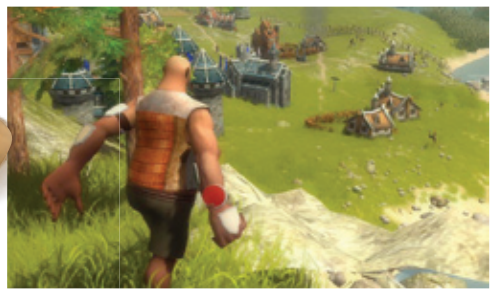
Finally, The Spy's had word of a further addition to the *Serious Sam* series. It'll be getting a widdle baby brother soon. As Duke Nukem dies, so the comedy shooter will carry on in **Serious Sam 3**. No other word about that game, but developer Croteam is also making a tactical military shooter set in the present day.

SPY ILLUSTRATION: DAVID LYTTLETON

MAJESTY 2

WE JUST CAN'T WAIT TO BE KING...

VITALS
DEVELOPER 1C
PUBLISHER Paradox Interactive
RELEASE Q3 2009 **LINK** Majesty2.com



If a giant wanders into town, hurry to your panic hut.

Who reading these hallowed pages hast played *Majesty*? Havest thoust, dear reader? If not, well, ye missed out. Falling somewhere between *Dungeon Keeper* in reverse and *SimCity*, *Majesty* was affectionately subtitled "The Fantasy Kingdom Simulator," an adage that's just as fitting for its sequel. You build a kingdom by investing gold into guard towers, your castle and markets, and construct guilds that produce various heroes.

THESE HEROES, which you build from the guilds (RTS-style, from boxed menus in the corner) are totally autonomous, and can only be motivated via flags with bounties of money tied to them. However, these money-carrots are far from lost: When a hero returns, he'll spend his bounty on potions and new weapons, and part of that cash goes back into your coffers, letting you upgrade your smithies and markets. Meanwhile, tax collectors swagger from house to house, forcing your peasantry to cough up more cash. Eventually, your game becomes a bizarre ecosystem of allocating funds: upgrade defenses, build flags and watch as that money trickles back into your coffers.

In our playtest, we had a warrior arrive at our town via the local guild. He strolled outside the village, then fought valiantly with bears, wolves and skeletons, loading up on gold as he went. At the same time, the taxes on the peasantry gained us enough money to activate both healing potions and nicer swords at the market and smithy. Our hero returned to town much stronger and carrying large sacks of gold. And within a few minutes, he was also far better equipped for his next adventure.

This fantasy economy drives *Majesty 2*, and it's a joyous system simply because there's a feeling of so many wheels turning at once. There's some restraint early on while you figure out the bounty system and get used to *not* controlling wizards, rogues and paladins directly—but once you have tens of heroes milling about, the world map opens up as they explore, revealing new quests and bigger battles with vicious dragons.

At present the game is a little more challenging than feels comfortable. More often than not your heroes will wander out of town just in time for a dragon to swoop in—and before you can order them back, your market is in ruin and you've lost your primary source of income.

Regardless, *Majesty 2* is fascinating. What's not to enjoy when you can order heroes to complete missions—or just watch them go about their own aimless adventures. **ED ZITRON**

MASS EFFECT 2

VITALS DEVELOPER BioWare PUBLISHER EA RELEASE Early 2010 LINK masseffect.com

NOW WITH MORE MASS AND GREATER EFFECTS!

Remember Conrad Verner? No? He's that irritating superfan who idolizes Spectres and hounded Commander Shepard for an autograph in the first *Mass Effect*. If you showed some courtesy to Conrad and posed for a photo, he'd convince himself that he can be a hero, too. But if you kept your Sharpie capped and told him to get lost, he'd foolishly rush off to fight a group of Turians to prove himself. Either way, it was a small bit of flavor in a very big game—a tasty tidbit that most of us dismissed as an amusing but meaningless aside.

It might've been easy to shrug Conrad off as a pesky wannabe, but there's more to our mystery man. In an exclusive chat, Casey Hudson, executive director of *Mass Effect 2*, told us why this sequel to the epic space-faring RPG will be even better than the first game—and why you should actually care about how you treated poor Mr. Verner.

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

Simultaneous release date? Probably not, but this time they should be in the same release window. We're guessing a few weeks later than the Xbox 360 release at the longest.

Composer Jack Wall returning? Maybe. We're told the score will be just as epic—that same earlicious mix of orchestral power fused with '80s electronica—but no confirmation yet on the composer.

Unlockable harem of blue space women? "There isn't, but I like that idea so much that I think I'll add it." Tell us you're not joking, Mr. Hudson. Please?!

A FOREST OF DIALOGUE TREES

He's back!

Any good RPG will at least offer the *illusion* that you're the man in charge. BioWare games tend to go one step further in convincing players that every action has a consequence, be it to their heroes or to the also-rans. "When you do something that appears to be a subplot, there's a reason why that subplot is important to the way the entire story plays out," Hudson says. "Because maybe that subplot is very important to one of your squad members and now they're loyal to you. Maybe that will play into the ending." But it doesn't just stop with the first game. "All of these threads that would have ended in *Mass Effect* 1, now those threads will return to the main story." That's right: almost every choice you made in the first game will resonate in the second and even carry through to the final part of this planned trilogy. Dead characters will stay dead—though if you managed to keep someone alive, they'll be there with you in *Mass Effect 2*. That applies even to the bit players, like our dear Conrad Verner. "Even by saying this, people who played *Mass Effect*, when they find out they'll see Conrad Verner in the second game, their minds will run wild with all kinds of possibilities," Hudson smiles. "That little decision was a fun, silly moment—what does that mean if he's there in the second game? Without giving it away, it's a really interesting plot about that character, and it's completely different depending on what you did in *Mass Effect* 1."

Tying up loose threads from first game is one thing. How about unraveling even more *new* threads? "It's getting to the point where the permutations for how it can end are relatively astronomical, because of all the decisions that affect the story. It's in the ending that you really start to see things come to fruition. Lots of people are going to die, lots of things are going to break down around you based on how well you made decisions and how well you set up your ending."

Wipeout!

RETROFITTING

But let's not get ahead of ourselves—there's still a to-do list BioWare needs to address to mend its action-RPG gameplay. PC gamers benefitted from a better interface by getting *ME* half a year later than Xboxers did, but we still suffered through some unfulfilled promises, like planet exploration. Scouting planets for outposts, artifacts and other treasure felt like an ordinary scavenger hunt, partly due to the busted controls for your Mako vehicle transport. Hudson says both will be fixed: "There's much more interaction with how you go out into space, how you find a planet, look for a place to land, find interesting things out there—and then when you actually get there, there's a lot more richness and variety in what you get to do." Your inventory will get a total overhaul, too: "Basically, we selected the inventory-management portion of the game, and then hit Delete."

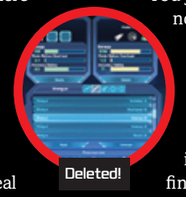
Who you might meet in the sequel depends entirely on your choices in the original game.

Handstands strictly required.

The new threat isn't Geth, but they look related.

...and they have robot pit bulls.

Early teaser trailers for the original *Mass Effect* promised much greater control over your squadmates. Hudson readily admits he had to toss that aside in order to simply ship the game, but is proud of the improvements made to the PC version that offered greater control of your squad's movements. "We've done that even more so for *Mass Effect 2*. And now we're getting to a point where the actual combat gameplay is into really fun, immersion, real-time stuff, because we made the powers a lot easier to do in real time. These are more context sensitive. You have discreet control over where your squad members go; you can issue those commands in real time." Hudson likens the refined combat to seeing a sports play coming together: "They're running there, here's the enemy, here's an exploding object, I happen to know that I have this power…*Boom*, you fire it off, you don't even have to pause the game, and great stuff starts happening." Oh, and you can also shoot body parts off of your alien enemies—always a nice touch in combat.


Deleted!

NEVERENDING STORY

You just beat the game…but you're not done exploring. No worries. "You actually can play past the ending," Hudson says, noting that he wanted to include this option in the first game but just couldn't get it done in time. "In *Mass Effect 2*, you finish the game, you have an incredible ending, credits roll, and then you're back in control of your character."

GARY STEINMAN

FALLOUT 3 DLC: The second wave

PREPARE TO BATTLE MUTANT HILLBILLIES AND ALIENS

Fallout 3 developer Bethesda Softworks originally planned to release only a trilogy of downloadable content expansions for their epic role-playing game—and our 2008 Game of the Year—ending with the excellent *Broken Steel* (see page 74 for the review). But it seems that an unexpectedly high number of gamers lining up to deposit money in Bethesda's bank account has changed some minds over there, and now two more juicy DLC chunks are coming our way real soon.

In June we'll see *Point Lookout*, a new beach town area on the Atlantic Ocean. "The player gets drawn into the quest at the behest of a stranger, and quickly gets wrapped up in a story that has the player exploring a long abandoned boardwalk and surrounding swamplands," says Lead Producer Jeff Gardiner. "The entire area unfolds like a swampy wasteland, with lots of exploration and freeform quests to be discovered." There you'll find new "yokel swamp-vibe" weaponry, like a double-barreled shotgun and an axe, plus there'll be three new perks to earn. All the new content will take place in this zone, but it's an open area where you can come and go as you please, unlike *The Pitt* and *Operation Anchorage*.

A month or so later, aliens will abduct you from the wasteland and take you to *Mothership Zeta*. "If the player has found the crashed ship in *Fallout 3*, you already have a good idea of what they'll look like," says Gardiner. "You'll learn why they're here, and it isn't to invite us to a peaceful intergalactic federation!" Bethesda is currently exploring different pieces of alien technology equipment, and you can expect a new (but finite) supply of alien power cells to run that tech.

Fallout 3 is becoming the RPG that just won't quit. Hopefully they'll keep this up until *Fallout: New Vegas* hits sometime in 2010.

TIGER TOUR ONLINE

PC DUFFERS FINALLY GET SOME BROWSER-BASED LOVE

You'd be right to feel abandoned if you're a PC-lovin' sports gamer. After all, you've practically been benched, relegated to the sidelines while console gamers seem to be having all the fun.

EA Sports realizes that it's been cruelly ignoring the PC market and now hopes to rectify that with *Tiger Woods PGA Tour Online*, a browser-based golf game that's promised to be as full-featured as any standalone console release. With almost no install and the ability to play from any computer—picking up a game in progress exactly where you left off—*PGA Tour Online* is as much of a casual experience aimed at cigar-chomping captains of industry as it is a hardcore challenge for serious gamers. Everything you'd expect from a Tiger Woods game is here, including the three-click swing and a well-stocked pro shop. Graphically, the game looks as good as a standard Xbox 360 game—it won't blow you away, but it's impressive enough for a browser-based release, and the graphics will easily scale to your PC (or, *gasp*, Mac).

EA has great news for swingers.

Out this fall, *Tiger Woods* will likely include a mix of subscription fees and microtransactions, along with some free-to-play content. The game will launch with six courses, with a new course introduced every month, along with scheduled tournaments and other special events—perfect for boosting your stats and status via the social networking features also planned for the game.

Brilliant... or just bizarre?

WoW Pod

Even the most irresponsible cat owner knows not to put the litter box next to the food bowl. After all, no self-respecting feline wants to crap where he eats. Not so for *WoW* players—at least based on the functionality of the WoW Pod, a Horde-like hut built by a trio of designers and now on display at the MIT Museum through this September. Sit on a throne that doubles as a toilet, munch on food (enough to sustain you for several days!) prepared on an automated stovetop, and sip spring water straight from wineskins. Then poop. While you're raiding. Joy.

Dinner boils while you toil for spoils.

QUARANTINED!

A public service message from the PC Gamer Infection Control team

Although the first wave of swine flu seems to have abated, we must not allow ourselves to become careless and overconfident. Only the most extreme vigilance regarding pigs and pork-derived products will prevent a recurrence. To that end, we hereby quarantine the following PC games for their porcine content:

BEYOND GOOD & EVIL
Pig accomplice

BRAVE PIGLET
Pork on a rope

CHARLOTTE'S WEB
Wilbur

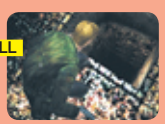
DUKE NUKEM 3D
Pig cops

MADDEN NFL 08
Pigskin

MANHUNT
Piggsy

THE POLITICAL MACHINE
Political pork

SILENT HILL
Pigsty



VAMPIRE THE MASQUERADE: BLOODLINES
Pig tails

REDNECK RAMPAGE
Pork rinds
(Double alert: may contain avian flu!)

S.W.I.N.E.
"Pig National Army"

PSYCHONAUTS
Bacon communicator

ZENO CLASH
Pig piles

THE LAST REMNANT
No pig content. Just got caught up in the hysteria.

DUKE NUKEM, 1991–2009

ULTRA-MASCULINE ACTION HERO AND AUTHOR OF *WHY I AM SO GREAT,* DIES OF UNNATURAL CAUSES

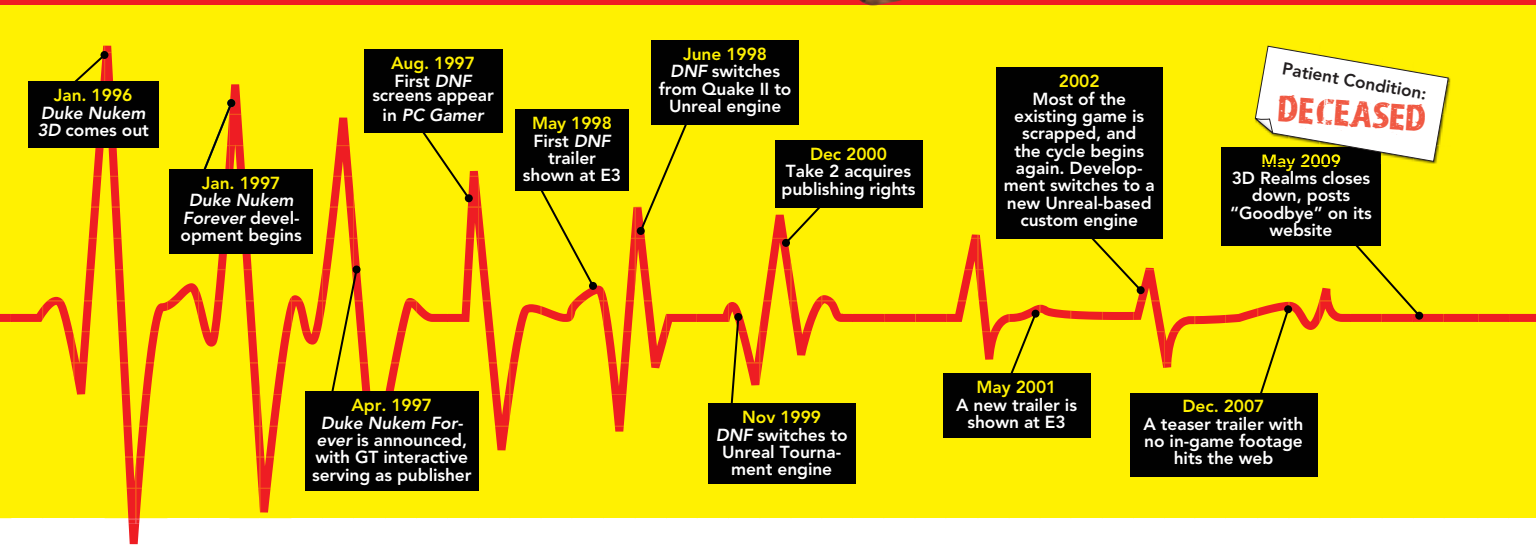
On May 6, 2009, legendary PC gaming icon and alien-killer Duke Nukem passed away after his legal guardian, 3D Realms, was no longer able to pay the bills and was forced to disconnect him from life support. Duke had existed in a persistent vegetative state for 12 years, unable to move or speak—much less kick ass or chew bubblegum—since development of *Duke Nukem Forever* collapsed shortly after its announcement in 1997. The cause of his sudden illness baffled gaming experts.

Many abandoned all hope years ago, but the announcement of Duke's death still came as a blow. In the past decade, many attempts had been made to revive the man who once proclaimed himself defender of Earth's chicks—including multiple graphics engine switches and several complete do-overs—but none proved successful. By 2005, despite constant assurances from 3D Realms that Duke was mentally aware and able to undress women with his eyes, the lack of any real sign of recovery forced experts to conclude that even if Duke were to regain consciousness, he would never fully recover his attitude and would likely be a hollow shell of his former self.

Duke is mourned by millions of gamers around the world who, for many agonizing years, had held out hope that he would one day reemerge to smack-talk new, fully 3D alien invaders. Gaming leaders are urging Congress to intervene with a proposed bill, titled "Duke's Law," that would divert Federal funding to resuscitate Duke in the interest of national security. However, the bill faces opposition from the powerful anti-fun lobby that makes politics so boring.

Duke's will requests that his body be cremated and snorted by strippers.

DUKE NUKEM FOREVER LIFE MONITOR



LAND OF THE DEAD

WHILE MOST MMOS SEGREGATE PVE AND PVP CONTENT, WARHAMMER ONLINE IS PUSHING HARDER THAN EVER TO INTEGRATE THE TWO

Ask anyone who played *Dark Age of Camelot* what they loved about the game and you're likely to get a 15-minute lecture on why a zone called Darkness Falls is better than "anything in your precious *WoW*." And they might be right.

Seven years ago Mythic invented Realm vs. Realm combat with Darkness Falls' brilliant blend of PvE and PvP objectives and now they're hoping to repeat that success with *Warhammer Online*'s new Egyptian-themed mega-zone, the Land of the Dead.

It begins like these things typically do: Chaos and Order were digging up the ruins of an ancient necromantic civilization that trapped the souls of everyone they conquered into one big casket and (surprise, surprise) the undead kings have risen, along with all their lich priests and servants, to defend their kingdom.

If that sounds like the plot from an Indiana Jones movie, it's intentional. Lead Designer Gabe Amatangelo tells me that they "wanted to get ARPG action in MMOs. Every public quest should feel like a different stage in a console action game." That would explain the gauntlet of gigantic pendulum axes that requires patience and perfect timing to cross successfully—just one of the many traps guarding the dungeons' treasures.

And then there are the "Mega Man bosses," a term the team fondly uses to refer to epic tussles that require skill-based movement along with the usual MMO min-maxing of stats and abilities. I don't want to spoil the surprise of the boss fights, but let's just say there are some very memorable moments and you might possibly end up trapped within the Casket of Souls having to fight your way out. The outdoor raid boss is very epic and scales in difficulty based on the number of people present (24–100).

THE ONLY CONSTANT IS CHANGE

I've never been a fan of daily quests; I grow tired of repeating the same content long before I have enough reputation or tokens for the reward. But after playing the infinitely repeatable public quests in Land of the Dead (required to unlock the minor boss lairs), I was impressed by their variety and the amount of random elements included to make the same quest unique every time you play it.

In less than an hour, I had been picked up by a mummified vulture mid-fight, used turrets to gun down zombie hordes attacking by land and sea, teleported around the world stealing books for a sentient (and pissed off) library, played a gigantic game of Simon Says with hieroglyphics, and been judged by laser beams shooting down from a Washington Monument-esque obelisk. And that's not counting the other 13 PQs, four 6-person boss lairs, and the 8-boss raid dungeon.

Gear can be bought through a solo-friendly token system, but it's definitely safer to bring a buddy or two.

PC Gamer Pop Quiz: How many skulls can you find on these two pages?

A WHOLE NEW WAAAGH!

Everything about Land of the Dead is meant to inspire RvR combat. Only one realm can control it at a time, providing players of that realm the ability to travel to and respawn within the zone. Tier 4 RvR player kills, city NPC kills, and capturing Tier 4 objectives all help fill your realm's resource meter and seize control of the Land.

Even after your realm controls the zone, enemy players already in the Land won't be booted until they die, so you'll have to track 'em down and send 'em packing, a process Mythic poignantly refers to as "purging." Just like in real life, purging ain't easy—but it's worth your time. Quests to clear out enemy base camps net you nice rewards.

This isn't *World of Warcraft* where zoning into an instance means a quick getaway. If enemies escape into an instance, you can follow them in to finish the job. But catching up to an enemy group inside a dungeon won't be easy. Remember those nasty traps mentioned earlier? The defending group can re-activate those traps behind them at any time, even when you're right in the middle of it.

Mythic is aiming for control of the zone to flip 1-2 times a night, so players never feel completely safe. "You're always on edge, always looking over your shoulder, because you know if you die you're getting booted out." JOSH AUGUSTINE

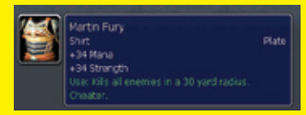
DEVELOPER TIPS FOR RESISTING THE PURGE

- Have your entire war band log out for 15 minutes after you lose control of the zone. Log back in to attack the enemy realm after they've let their guard down.
- Hide in one of the secret locations in the zone, like the oasis, and wait for stragglers to pass by alone.
- Keep your healer alive—you won't be able to respawn in the zone after you've lost control of it.
- If you're in an instance, turn on the traps behind you to slow down the invading enemy players.
- Remember, just like a zombie apocalypse, there are no safe places during a purge, only "safer" ones.

The MMO Times-Picayune

Furious Rampage

After accidentally receiving the Martin Fury GM item in the mail from Blizzard, Gnome Warrior Karatechop used it to



instantly kill bosses in hard mode in Ulduar, scoring loot and achievements for his guild and an outrageous 353 million damage in a single hit. Unsurprisingly, Karatechop was banned from *Word of Warcraft*. It's tough to argue against the ban when the item description clearly says, "Use: Kills all enemies in a 30 yard radius. Cheater."

Big "People for Stuff" Raffle!

Player Siri Blue has announced a new contest inside *EVE Online*, selling raffle tickets in exchange for people. Players often get humans as "cargo" for missions and Siri wants them all for unknown reasons. "Homeless, slaves, exotic dancers, tourists, marines—everything is ok." Well, except for bovines: "Cows do not count as people," she says. PETA might disagree.

Because the World Needs to Know

Best described as an in-game OS, PlayXpert—the widget-based overlay that lets you listen to music, check RSS feeds, text and voice chat with friends, and pull up a browser without having to leave your game window—recently added a Twitter widget, so now everyone can know how awesome you're doing in battlegrounds tonight.

It's Developed by Paragon

Only 24 hours after the *City of Heroes'* Mission Architect tool—which we introduced here in our June issue—went live, players had already created 3,800 story arcs, more than the rest of the game had after five full years of development. In less than one week that number had already quintupled to over 20,000!

Epic Loot of the Month

Val'anyr, Hammer of the Ancients Kings

Only the 7th legendary weapon introduced to *World of Warcraft*, the mace can be obtained in the newest raid dungeon Ulduar. It's the first legendary weapon meant for healers, giving a chance to proc a powerful shielding spell on their target every time they heal. It also has a 100% chance to make everyone around you jealous in major cities.

50% more polygons per car means 50% more fiberglass debris to scatter the track with.

Tires will even deflate realistically if punctured.

DiRT 2

A SLIPPERIER SEQUEL

It may be lapping on a whole different circuit than realistic sims like *iRacing*, but Codemasters continues to dominate the arcade car space, shoving its competition into the realistically lit brush. The dev's buttery handling has been fun in *DiRT* and *GRID*, but clambering behind the wheel of any of *DiRT 2*'s garage reveals a fresh weight and heft that needs to be managed and used to your advantage. The famous Scandinavian Flick—where you feint the car in the opposite direction before a corner to allow you to lob it more forcefully into a tight bend—is now no longer a flashy optional maneuver, but key to a quick time. The responsive brakes, potent traction and logical momentum makes driving the cars feel far more natural and, in many cases, more predictable. Crashes are rarely down to failure to avoid an errant rock or branch and more down to over-enthusiasm with the newly chuckable vehicles.

The game is packed with new flourishes to decorate this solid core, with the team's latest toy being H_20. Puddles seem a blindingly obvious addition to a game dedicated to mud play, but recent efforts to replicate standing water in rally games haven't stuck. Not so here: When a rally-spec Mitsubishi plunges into the wet stuff, there's a vision-impairing rush of water up the windscreen that looks utterly convincing. From outside, the sun glints on the rippling wake as the car churns through the hazard. Satisfying rally games translate the tactile differences between various road surfaces to the player, and there's a noticeable feeling of drag when the wheels and front wing are submerged.

Codemasters is keen to emphasize increased player involvement that will occur off the track. You'll interact with pro drivers like Ken Block and Travis Pastrana, building (and breaking) relationships with your on-track escapades. Punt Pastrana off at a corner, and he'll be less pally when you run into him off the tarmac, and may not invite you to valuable career events.

It's difficult not to come away from playing *DiRT 2* with anything less than a smile on your face. The new handling model is plausible and satisfying while feeling terrifyingly quick in your hands, and in the periphery, Codies is making a genuine attempt at a complete and coherent racing experience. McRae's legacy appears to be in extremely safe hands. MIKE CHANNELL

Crashes won't just dent a static life bar, but liberate parts from your ride and impact steering and other systems.

VITALS **DEVELOPER** Codemasters Racing Studio **PUBLISHER** Codemasters **RELEASE** September **LINK** codemasters.com

ARTFUL DODGERS

Before they founded ACE Team, Andres, Carlos and Edmundo created The Dark Conjection, a full single-player conversion of *Quake 3*.

ZENO CLASH EMBEDDED US IN AN IMAGINATIVE, ILLUSTRATIVE WORLD. WITH A SEQUEL EN ROUTE, ACE TEAM TELLS US HOW THEY SYNTHESIZED ART AND COMBAT.

ZENO CLASH 2

ACE Team recently announced a sequel to *Zeno Clash*. Other than "it will take a long time to develop," here's what we know, straight from ACE's Carlos Bordeau:

- *Zeno Clash 2* will be larger in scope, feature open-ended gameplay and RPG elements
- Ghat's story will remain the focus (he'll deal with "new conflicts of larger scale"), with Father Mother "continuing to be a key character," and Golem playing a more significant role
- Adding multiplayer or co-op play is "not completely decided"
- "We still have larger expectations for the first game. We will continue to support *Zeno Clash* with free DLC."

Chile is a fringe nation—a thin ribbon skirting the edge of South America. It's fitting that our favorite indie game this year comes from this geographic and creative perimeter; *Zeno Clash* captured our imagination with its refreshingly strange art direction and fresh first-person fisticuffs alike. We spoke with Andres, Carlos and Edmundo Bordeau (alphabetically, the founding members of ACE Team) about Corwids, squirrel bombs, their recently announced sequel and how a team of less than 10 can produce such an original experience. EVAN LAHTI

PC Gamer: How would you describe the state of first-person games, or action games today—either in terms of art design or gameplay mechanics? What critique would you offer the genre?
Carlos I think the first-person genre has evolved to a point where it has perfected a very specific type of game. Iteration after iteration, we've seen game studios improve over existing game mechanics, graphics and other features. But the truth is that first-person shooters have not reinvented themselves or diverged from a very specific design in years. We've seen a lot of competition in making the best war simulator/space marine shooter. This has caused the genre to become very homogeneous, and we see little variation in it—though there are some exceptions like *BioShock* and *Mirror's Edge*. In terms of art style, photorealism seems to be the only thing that developers are aiming for, with little incentive to explore non-photorealistic rendering and artistically inspired graphics.

There's a healthy conversation about games being "art" today. For ACE Team, what purpose does *Zeno Clash*'s art serve? Should games aim to be like art?
Edmundo I think that worrying about whether you are making art or not can be a problem. What does the "high art club" consider art? That question can lead to an interesting discussion, but not to something useful for your artwork, characters or story. I consider I am making art when I make something with a special meaning for me, and I don't intend to create something more "art-like" than that.

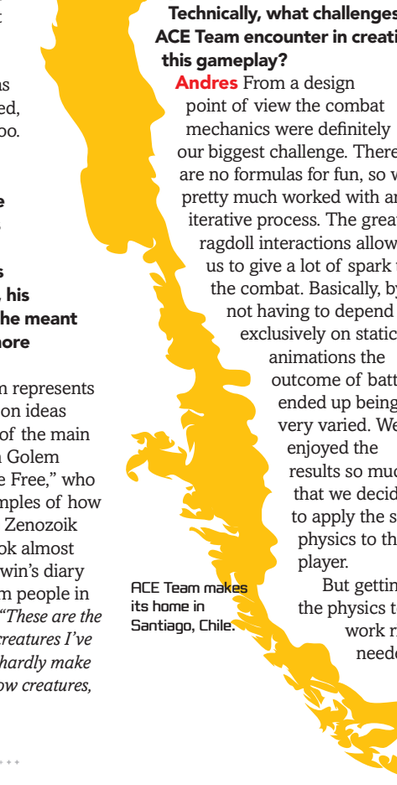
The team never got together and decided "this is going to be our art statement," but at the same time we know that lot of our art decisions wouldn't be approved by a focus group, and we don't care about that. Some aspects of games don't need to be judged as art, but others should; if you are adding a story to a game, you should make sure it is interesting and consistent with the game. For *Zeno Clash* I wrote the story more than three times—as gameplay features changed, the story had to change too.

"There are no formulas for fun."

Of all the interesting characters that populate Zenozoik, Golem strikes me as the most curious. How he's discovered, his abilities and knowledge, his distinct appearance—is he meant to represent anything more significant?
Edmundo For me, Golem represents a structured world based on ideas and history, the opposite of the main world of Zenozoik. When Golem meets "The Corwid of the Free," who are the most distinct examples of how unconventional people in Zenozoik can be, he says a line I took almost directly from Charles Darwin's diary when he met the Selk'Nam people in Tierra del Fuego (Chile): *"These are the most abject and miserable creatures I've anywhere beheld. One can hardly make oneself believe they are fellow creatures, and inhabitants of the same world."*

When I read this it impressed me how little imagination Darwin had about how different people can be. Thousands of the Selk'Nam died because the western colonizers had no respect for them. I make this parallel because for the Golem, with all his knowledge and power—and even good intentions—being "civilized" does not make him more humane.

He is surrounded by "impressive" symbols, like golden texts, a temple too big for the human scale, unknown technologies, which are interpreted as magic by those who don't know them—and even a Rubik's cube, a rational object made of plastic, something completely alien to the world of Zenozoik—but all these symbols have no meaning for the normal people like the protagonists Ghat and Deadra.



ACE Team makes its home in Santiago, Chile.

The Source engine's ragdoll animations and physics lend themselves very well to first-person hand-to-hand combat. Technically, what challenges did ACE Team encounter in creating this gameplay?
Andres From a design point of view the combat mechanics were definitely our biggest challenge. There are no formulas for fun, so we pretty much worked with an iterative process. The great ragdoll interactions allowed us to give a lot of spark to the combat. Basically, by not having to depend exclusively on static animations the outcome of battles ended up being very varied. We enjoyed the results so much that we decided to apply the same physics to the player.

But getting the physics to work right needed a lot of tweaking. One of the things we fought from day one was avoiding all sorts of clipping issues. Our characters frequently got stuck on the environment, sank in the floor, and had other nasty problems. De-ragdolling characters proved to be more difficult than we thought. Whenever you're working with a dynamic feature such as physics, you can't always forsee how the assets will react with the environment.

The one-two punch of furious fisticuffs in a mind-spinning setting was our favorite aspect of *Zeno Clash*.

Toughest question last: Can you settle a heated debate we've had around the office? Which weapon would you bring into battle—fish guns or squirrel bombs?
Carlos The squirrel bombs aren't so useful if you don't have something with which to ignite them. And it's easier to get fish than squirrels. You can just go to the supermarket and buy some barracudas and strap them to your cannons.

The Sniper got an anti-Spy shield; the Spy got a powerful handcannon. Who's better off post-update?

SPY VS. SNIPER

YOU'VE BACKSTABBED, YOU'VE FEIGNED DEATH, YOU'VE IMPALED EYE SOCKETS WITH ARROWS. VALVE'S *TEAM FORTRESS 2* GURUS TELL US HOW THE GAME'S BIGGEST CLASS UPDATE YET CAME TO BE

What do the new unlockables say about the personalities of the Sniper and Spy?

Eric Wolpaw The Spy's unlocks promote both his love of gadget-based chicanery (the two watches) and his deep regard for inflicting psychological pain on his enemies (a handgun big enough that the last thing you ever see is a sexy picture of your mother engraved on it's humongous barrel). The Sniper's new tools all bring him back to his outback roots. They're not especially high-tech and stress more traditional (the Huntsman), jerry-rigged (the Razorback) and ad hoc (Jarate) methods of dealing with opponents.

Is it fair to say that as players gain expertise, Valve sees unlockables as an opportunity to push players out of their comfort zones?

Robin Walker Fundamentally, we think players start to leave games when they've exhausted all the content in them. In multiplayer games, much of that content is produced by other players, using the tools the designers have given them. We think it's vital for us to keep giving players new tools with which to generate content for each other.

We enjoy putting tradeoffs in front of players. By allowing them to play around with the tradeoffs, we hopefully teach them a little bit about their play style. For instance, many Snipers will tell you that Spies are their worst nightmare. Many other Snipers will list the techniques they've learned to combat Spies. It's really interesting to us to put an item like the Ravzorback in front of all these players, and force them to choose between it and the SMG—the Razorback will really help you against Spies, but the SMG is much more useful against everything else. Like any good tradeoff, the right choice depends a lot on the context, both of the state of the current game and the skillsets of the players involved.

What ideas for Sniper and Spy unlockables got cut? Were the original *TF Classic*'s hallucinogenic "Spy drugs" too disruptive to include?

Walker *TFC*'s hallucinogenic grenades were a funny thing. Their effect was of no real use, never fooling any experienced player. Their only real value was the damage-over-time they caused to enemies standing in the cloud, which Spies used to prevent Engineers from staying at their sentryguns. In *TF2* we already have a variety of anti-sentry-gun tools, like the sapper, so it didn't seem like the most fruitful approach to Spy unlocks. On the Sniper side, after a bunch of playtesting we cut the first alternative to the sniper rifle we designed, which we believed would be the most straightforward unlockable yet: a rifle like the *Counter-Strike* Steyr Scout, which trades off power for maneuverability. In the end, it made us remember why we have all the features in the current sniper rifle (zoom and charge for more damage, loss of maneuverability and vision while charging).

What new roles did you expect players to take on with the new Spy watches?

Walker Internally, we saw some players use the Cloak & Dagger to "haunt" a specific area of the map, attacking enemies passing through it and/or preventing Engineers from getting any base setup. We saw Cloak & Dagger spies using The Ambassador to pop in and out of stealth, picking off retreating enemies behind the combat line, forgoing the use of their knife entirely. We saw Spies using the Dead Ringer and the Ambassador to become death-dealing machines who fight in plain sight, killing enemies they catch alone, and feigning and escaping as soon as reinforcements show up.

RTS Romance

IF *EMPIRE: TOTAL WAR* MADE SWEET, STRATEGIC LOVE TO *COMPANY OF HEROES*, THEIR BABY BOOMER WOULD BE ORDER OF WAR. HERE'S THE 30-SECOND PITCH:

Like *COH*'s most recent expansion, *Order of War* lets you play as the Germans—for nine missions of the total 18 (the other nine are from the Soviet side). It's focused on ground-level combat; you'll only use aircraft to insert more forces and issue airstrikes. Capturing control points moves missions forward. Like *Empire: Total War*, **the game is played more on a macro level:** You're commanding up to 1000 soldiers and tank units at a time, each with very independent AI; directing these regiments around means the game is more about positioning than micro-actions like lobbing grenades into bunkers (which your units do automatically). And like *Empire*, **everything is intricately animated** with granular details—the boost in scale doesn't mean visual elements like bomb-shattered rooftops, quiet lilypad ponds and artillery-scorched earth escape it. Jeremy Soule (of *COH*) composes the soundtrack. **There's no base buildin'.**

BUT UNLIKE COH AND TOTAL WAR...

There's no focus on managing a global map of economy, politics, spies or a fleet of warships. **You can pause combat to issue commands.** Colorful intro movies bookend each mission, interspersed with war reel footage and strategic plans. There are a handful of big toys to play with, like the Leopold, a railway-mounted artillery gun, and the German King Tiger tank. **You can activate a cinematic, dynamic, hands-free camera system** to watch your battles unfold like an endless episode of *Band of Brothers* (only with less crying, maybe).

Belarusian developer Wargaming.net previously brought us the *Massive Assault* games.

VITALS **DEVELOPER** Wargaming.net **PUBLISHER** Square Enix **RELEASE** Fall 2009 **LINK** orderofwar.com

THE 17-WORD PREVIEW*: DARK VOID

The most extreme multitasking ever: vertical cover combat. Fight against enemies, gravity and vertigo all at once!

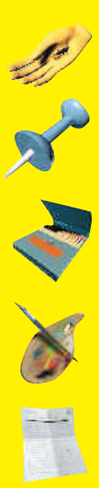
*Everything you need to know...well, except that the jetpack is pretty awesome. And you can skyjack UFOs.

PCG REPLAYS THE GREAT GAMES OF OLD

THE LONGEST JOURNEY

GETTING THE BALANCE RIGHT

April Ryan's journey will take her to incredible worlds, but initially she just needs to find her clothes.



Released: November 2000
Developer: Funcom
Publisher: Funcom
PC Gamer final verdict: 90% (February 2001)
What we said then: "...a brilliantly constructed adventure game."

LOGAN When I read a book, I don't bitch about how heavy it is, or that it doesn't fit into my back pocket, or that I lose my place if the bookmark falls out. Nobody does. When you're reading a book, it becomes a playground for your imagination and you forget that you're even holding it. I think *The Longest Journey* comes closer to the experience and pleasure of literature than any other game I can think of. And just like when I'm reading, I completely forget about all the attendant flaws and limitations of the adventure genre while I'm playing it. The characters are that alive; the story's that good; the worlds are that engrossing.

GARY After hearing you gush about *The Longest Journey*, I couldn't wait to jump in. I was never a big fan of the "funny" adventures, mostly because they're just not funny to me. (Sorry, simian apologists, but monkeys alone do not equal humor. Neither do pirates. Deal with it.) So when I booted this game up, I was tickled to see a realistic character with contemporary issues in a near-future sci-fi/fantasy setting. Too bad that initial charm didn't carry through for me—at least not in the expected way. I grew to like *The Longest Journey* more because of its anachronisms than its timelessness. All the characters are straight out of central casting from an early '90s dramedy, complete with the progressive lesbian couple running a boarding house full of creative types who are somewhat "lost" in their ways. Daddy was mean to you? Waah. Get over it, and quit complaining about how tough it is to find inspiration for your paintings while working at bar owned by a gruff proprietor with a heart of gold.

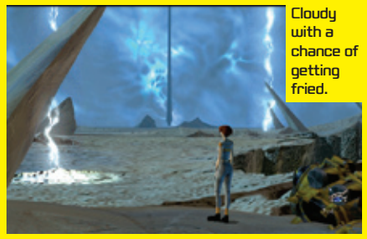
LOGAN But that's exactly what an 18-year-old art student would complain about! And her fundamental personality doesn't change just because the world—and *worlds*—around her do. She reacts in ways that seem right for a young woman dealing with everyday life (an awkward date) and incredibly strange circumstances (leaping between worlds). She's funny and believable and real, all the way through.

EVAN I love the self-awareness April is written with. April doesn't completely buy into her situation—she may learn to speak Alltongue, and she's determined to find the four parts of a magical disc, but she isn't afraid to issue a "WTF" when long monologues about Order, Balance and whatever magical dragons are guiding the mystical universe-binding forces enter the equation. And maybe it's my preference for sci-fi, but my time spent in Stark was preferable to Arcadia—being in a near-future art gallery or subway, dealing with smart-talking infocomputers and robocops, going on an awkward date…it felt right. On the other hand, in Arcadia, I got to trap an evil alchemist's soul in a calculator.

GARY I dunno about that calculator…perhaps I just like the idea of an adventure game better than the reality of it. *The Longest Journey* does nothing wrong within its genre. You get lots of detailed settings, you roam around, you seek out little items, you combine them and use them in unusual ways. But I guess I expected more from *TLJ* because the setting is so unique and well-crafted. Is it too much to ask for logical puzzles that make sense and also expand the story? Really—how the heck would I know I'm supposed to attach a clothesline to a clamp, then pull a band-aid off rubber ducky, inflate said ducky, then use it to "fish" for a key hidden on a train track (the clamp closes as the ducky deflates). Despite its ambitions to show me something different, *TLJ* relies on the same shopworn adventure tropes that only make sense to hardcore aficionados. The rest of us will be rummaging through FAQs in order to get by.

EVAN Here's an excerpt from the troubleshooting section of *TLJ*'s manual:
Q: My girlfriend/boyfriend left me and took all my records. What to do?
A: Play *The Longest Journey*. It heals all wounds, and makes you forget.

Beats backpacking through Europe.



Cloudy with a chance of getting fried.

Happy Hour at Metro Circle.

It's a funny aside by writer/designer Ragnar Tørnquist (among many others in the manual), but it really does connect with how I feel about the game. It's this vast world that doesn't throw up roadblocks to your emotional engagement—even if you're stuck on a puzzle that asks you to combine candy with a bag of flour to trap a worm that you need to put inside of an apple in order to give it to a ship captain. It's hard to get particularly frustrated with the occasional opaque puzzle because the dialogue always buoys your attention.

LOGAN Wacky puzzles in many adventure games feel cheap, because the story and environments are listless and the puzzles seem intended to add some flavor, like dumping salt into week-old leftovers. But the worlds in *The Longest Journey* feel real. They're messy and lived in, full of energy and human activity. After the first few disorienting opening scenes—Who's this old hag? What's with the floaty dude?—I wanted to understand what was going on. I wanted to explore, to talk to people. I wanted to get to the bottom of the game's mystery as much as April Ryan did. I didn't feel annoyed by dialog trees, or screen-scraping for pixels. I didn't think about the mechanics of these things, because I'm in the midst of a terrific mystery and I wanted to find out what comes next. Again, it's all about story.

> "In Arcadia, I got to trap an evil alchemist's soul in a calculator."

GARY Hey, don't get me wrong. At $10 [via Steam], *TLJ* is a great pickup. Not sure that I'd call it a classic, but it's a different kind of adventure, which makes it worthwhile for adventure fans who missed it the first time around—or grumpy monkey-haters like me, looking for a story-driven game that works great on my netbook.

If you need a giant prompt to remind you to talk to people, perhaps the front desk is not for you.

TRAINING DAY

ON-THE-JOB INSTRUCTION, VIA PC GAMES

While games are too often seen as a distraction, you can also use them to learn. The pinnacle of the game-and-teaching tool combo is *Typing of the Dead*, which lets you dispatch zombies with accurate, speedy typing. But that's years old: the future of game learning lies with these games.

VIRTUAL HILTON

Not at *all* what it sounds like. Instead, the Hilton hotel chain is using a game to help teach staff how to get through a day. The Virtual Hilton Garden Inn adventure game sees the staff managing housekeeping, food service, engineering, maintenance and the front desk, and given an allotted time to fulfill a guest's wishes. No, not what *that* sounds like, either.

AMERICA'S ARMY

Before you can take to the battlefields in *America's Army*, you have to take a 20-minute test. You even spend part of the game sitting at a desk. There's plenty of shooting, rifle ranges and squad-based action going on here, but in this military sim you're bound to the Rules of Engagement, and you'll learn something of what our military expects of its soldiers. Part 3 is out this year, for free: **www.aa3.americasarmy.com.**

Do you go up or down? Remember: fire burns, and burning is hot.

FIRE ESCAPE

Durham University used the Source engine to simulate a hazardous fire in a building in order to prototype and test fire escapes. It's a bit like the early escape sequence in *Half-Life 2*, except instead of the Combine blocking your way, it's flames. Unfortunately, the team discovered that rather than testing how good their fire escape plans were, they were actually testing how much experience test subjects had playing games—because the gamers always fared the best. Whoops! **www.dur.ac.uk/shamus.smith/fire.**

release meter

WHAT YOU'LL BE PLAYING 0809

So you're looking at this list, probably salivating a little and saying to yourself, "It's impossible for this list to be any more exciting." Friend, you are wrong. You've forgotten about two little characters I like to call "E" and "3." The reanimated (but thankfully not zombie) expo returns to its roots this year with booth babes and more spectacle, so get your girlish squees ready for the big announcements. —*Josh the Intern*

Q3 2009

Borderlands	2K
Champions Online	2K
Wolfenstein	Activision
Machinarium	Amanita Design
Trine	Ascaron
StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty	Blizzard
Bionic Commando	Capcom
Dark Void	Capcom
DiRT 2	Codemasters
Ride to Hell	Deep Silver
Battlefield: 1943	EA
Battlefield Heroes	EA
Saboteur	EA
Divinity 2: Ego Draconis	CDV
Just Cause 2	Eidos
Mini Ninjas	Eidos
Fallen Earth	Fallen Earth
Blood Bowl	Focus Home Interactive
Hearts of Iron III	Paradox
Section 8	SouthPeak
Edge of Twilight	SouthPeak
Red Faction: Guerilla	THQ
America's Army 3	U.S. Army
CrimeCraft	Vogster

Q4 2009

BioShock 2: Sea of Dreams	2K
Mafia II	2K
Operation Flashpoint: Dragon Rising	Codemasters
Battlefield: Bad Company 2	EA
Dragon Age: Origins	EA
Global Agenda	Hi-Rez
Painkiller: Resurrection	JoWood
S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Call of Pripyat	TBD
Metro 2033	THQ
Mytheon	True Games

2010

Star Trek Online	Cryptic
Supreme Commander 2	Gas Powered Games
Aliens vs. Predator	Sega
Red Orchestra: Heroes of Stalingrad	Tripwire
R.U.S.E.	Ubisoft

LEFT 4 DEAD 2

Back 4 More!

Five new campaigns, four more survivors, three insane melee weapons, and new special infected to fight, too. Oh, and one surprising release date: this holiday. Hang on to your health kits.

By Evan Lahti

On the count of four, a high school football coach will lead me to my doom. He's holding a frying pan, trying to bolster our team with a few words before we outrun another horde of infected. It's probably not the sort of pep talk he's used to giving under Friday night lights, but we'll take it.

"When we open this door, it's going to sound an alarm," he starts. We're prepping to exit a checkpoint the government used as an evacuation area for survivors, an abandoned trailer where Louisianans were filtered like cattle when everyone fled the city. Anyone who didn't show signs of infection would walk this linked maze of fences, then board buses to take them over the bridge. I roll a bandage over my forearm while Coach clarifies the gameplan.

"They'll keep coming until we de-activate the siren...**if we stay still when we hit this, we're gonna die.** We need to make it to that tower." *Left 4 Dead 2* frontman Chet Faliszek points to a wooden watchpost tower in the parking lot. Faliszek isn't an actual high school football coach, but it makes sense that he's playing one in his game: He knows this turf much better that we do. This isn't our home court—a zombie shooter set in the deep south, often in broad daylight and on unfamiliar terrain, with new boss infected we haven't fought before. In other words, we need all the help we can get.

Coach cracks the door, and we run like hell. It's a track meet to the tower to switch off the alert horn. "We have to keep moving, *keep moving*," Faliszek reminds me, catching a few of us crouching into a defensive stance. We try to make our chorus of mouse clicks louder than the screaming wave of unpeople swarming around. I backpedal around the narrow maze. "Smoker!" a teammate cries out. **He's snared, and I have to leave him.** We're in a foot race, and turning around would only bury us in more infected. I jump-climb the tower ladder, lunging at the top to smash the button like a game show buzzer. It gets quieter...

BRAINS, Y'ALL

Left 4 Dead told stories. Whatever innovation or tireless replayability you found from the game's four-person co-op and asymmetrical versus, the hours we spent were well-invested because we came away with incredible water cooler moments: the perfect Smoker pull off a precarious ledge, pouncing on the last survivor inches from the safe room, heroic sacrifices to save incapacitated teammates and last-second "Get to the choppa!" leaps into rescue helicopters.

But there's always room for improvement. As we gained familiarity with the levels' apocalyptic crannies, some sessions felt like we were running drills—routine exercises on huddling in a corner and other techniques we adopted to deal with the game's challenging crescendo events. These not only felt cowardly, but they hampered the spirit of the cooperation and improvisation that makes *L4D* worth playing. In a game where the most memorable experiences can emerge from player error and taking chances, predictability is an enemy.

Aim for the kneecaps to stop runners or climbers in their tracks.

"We definitely looked at the problems online—what are bad behaviors that we want to cure people of?" Faliszek starts. "We updated *L4D* so the Tank could hit multiple survivors if they were grouped in a corner, and one of the new boss infected, the Charger, works along those lines. We're also going to have variations in boss infected, where a Smoker or a Boomer has mutated, and has slightly different abilities." Variety. Brilliant. Faliszek continues, mentioning a new flavor of Witch that shambles around, a "wandering Witch."

But that's not the most significant upgrade, says Valve's VP of Marketing Doug Lombardi. "The biggest change, really, is introducing the notion of melee combat. There's an axe, a frying pan, and a couple of other pieces that are being added in." Faliszek eagerly chimes in: "There *will* be a chainsaw." Lombardi laughs. "And that's more ways to slaughter zombies, number one, but also a different style of combat that hopefully reduces friendly fire in close quarters."

Adding more weapons, new special infected and longer campaigns is a strong start to solving predictability and boosting the materials available to the director, *L4D*'s AI orchestrator technology. But we're most excited about the new setting. *L4D2* is a doomed tour of the American south. Forget Bill and Zoey—they won't be showing up. Georgia, Louisiana and the region between is a zone miles away from the first game's cliché horror movie settings—replaced by lonely farms and abandoned cityscapes rife with all the eeriness inherent to the south's sweaty climate, secessionist ideals, aged plantations and muddy alligator dens.

"I'm kind of surprised it hasn't been picked dry already. As soon as we started sketching concepts of zombies running down the streets of the French Quarter, you see them and you're like 'Okay, that totally works.' And you see another with zombies coming out of an old plantation house—'Yeah, that really works too.' Savannah and New Orleans, there's the occult and voodoo, and everything's haunted; there's crypts above the ground. That's creepy in and of itself," says Lombardi.

Faliszek goes on to explain how story and character development will be more of a focus in *L4D2*. "The world itself is just more alive and more changing. With *Left 4 Dead* 1, we kind of kept the characters individual and just ran with it. But in *2*, they meet the second the game starts outside a mall," Faliszek teases us, indicating that the starting point is an obvious nod to classic zombie flicks. "…and go from there. They get to learn about each other as we learn about them. We have a little bit more interaction between them, they have arcs that happen across the game. It's not just about their travel, but the entire world. We see the FEMA-like friendly organization reacting, and more of the military in New Orleans, and we show the collapse. You see the way different groups decided to interact with the infection—some people holed up and tried to do it on their own, some people are just fleeing—it's a more epic story of what the infection is doing to the world and the people."

Being thematically distinct from *L4D*'s hospital hallways and Pennsylvania farm paths is nice, but the south fashions new takes on the base gameplay. The muddy bayou of the third campaign (there'll be five total—one more than *L4D*) is a flooded forest with only traces of civilization—rustic plank shacks floating in algae pools. Get ankle-deep in one, and your running speed slows to a walk, making it harder to flee. But tactically, you're put in situations where getting your socks wet can help: In an early chapter, we opt to patrol the river by walking in it, allowing us a better view of any oncoming infected in the open stream than we'd get by jogging along the dense, tree-lined shoreline. The mud is unnerving—more than Dead Air's baggage-claim maze or Blood Harvest's cornfield—and that's a good thing.

FRESH MEAT

Know 'em well—these four faces will be your best friends in L4D2.

Rochelle, 26
Voiced by Rochelle Aytes (White Chicks, Madea's Family Reunion)

Coach, 39
Voiced by Chad L. Coleman (The Wire)

Ellis, 21
Voiced by Eric Ladin (Generation Kill)

Nick, 35(ish)
Voiced By Hugh Dillon (Flashpoint)

QUOTE FROM THE AUDITION*: "Oh, don't worry—I said I'd do it, and I'll do it…but I'm dragging your sorry ass with me."

Rochelle graduated from Cleveland State to become an on-air news personality, but months of unsuccessful job hunting stalled her dream. When the outbreak struck Atlanta two months later, Rochelle headed straight to the evacuation center in Savannah to produce her first big news segment, only to be trapped in the middle of a war zone. But she'll be damned if she'll let this zombie apocalypse ruin her big break.

Valve casts its *L4D2* characters like real movie actors. "We'll come up with hundreds of concepts and ideas," says Faliszek. "Some are just words, sometimes we'll give words to the artists and they'll come up with concepts. Then what we do is go out and find a body model to try and cast the right look for the character based on the sketches we had before."

QUOTE FROM THE AUDITION: "I'll just say one thing: you shoot me again, I'll break that rifle off in your ass and spin you around like cotton candy, you hear me?!"

When the infection broke out, Coach regretted not running along with his students more often. Teaching health class and serving as defensive coordinator for the local high school team might not be the best path to a career coaching pro football, but it had sure been better than battling thousands of bloodthirsty zombies.

Faliszek: "I thought the coolest character ever would be a DMV lady. Especially back east—these heavy-set women who work at the DMV that you'd want on your side in a zombie apocalypse because they'd kill *everything*. But it ended up not being that cool of a character. Coach kind of fills that same role of 'that guy you just want on your side.' He can be loving and supportive but also kind of scary."

QUOTE FROM THE AUDITION: "I've got another plan. Set everything on fire. I mean *everything*. Houses, buildings, set everything on fire, shoot every f@(#*!% thing that moves. When we're done shooting everything that's f@(#*!% moving, and burning…we're *out*, we win. We call that Plan A."

Ellis never wanted to be anywhere but Savannah. Where else could a man who barely finished high school find happiness working on cars for a living? He sees everything as a dare, and his enthusiasm and youthful sense of immortality keeps him high on life even as the world crumbles around him.

Ellis' enthusiasm (and penchant for cocky destruction) reminded us of another Valve character—*Team Fortress 2*'s Scout. When we pointed out the similarity, Valve told us Scout's voice actor actually tried out for Ellis' job, but they wanted to stick with a southern accent.

QUOTE FROM THE AUDITION: "The last people on Earth are me, and the goddamn three stooges."

Nick never had stayed put anywhere very long—not back home in the Midwest, not in the joint, and certainly not here. There's no violence on his rap sheet, just some small-time stuff from bilking tourists on the gambling cruises. Nothing big, happens to everyone. He hadn't planned to hang around Savannah anyway, but he'd figured it'd be easier to get out of town than this.

Nick's sharp suit and greased-back hair slots him somewhere between mafia and *Miami Vice* stunt double. "They each have a distinct silhouette," says Faliszek. "The silhouettes of the characters, you can confuse one guy for the other at a distance—we're not that worried about that. We want to make sure you don't confuse them for the zombies. We've done some changes to the zombies to help that."

*Note: Valve tells us these quotes aren't pulled from an actual script, but were only intended for auditioning the characters. Still, we'd expect the color of the lines to resemble the cast.

Blame it on the rain—dynamic weather will be another tool for the director to stir up mayhem in *L4D2*.

NO MERCY

"*Now with frying pans! Enhanced dismemberment!*" If you would've told me months ago that these were accurate taglines for *L4D2*, I'd have wondered what brutal housewives had infiltrated Valve. In fact, melee weaponry and loss-of-limbs are the most exciting moment-to-moment improvements I've seen in the sequel, and both have welcome (and literal) impact on gameplay mechanics.

I found my first axe on the second floor of a pool hall in the fifth campaign. A blur of adrenaline and adolescent tactics followed—hacking down doors, calling my victims names as I lopped off their forearms, rushing packs of zombies ahead of my teammates, jump-swinging at infected climbing over obstacles. Clutching a skillet in the swamp, I snuck up behind a Smoker to attempt a skillful kill—he ensnared me when I was just 15 feet away, but I got off a swing with the pan before I was fully ensnared. *Clang!* (When I wondered where I heard that sound before, Faliszek admitted it's his ring tone.) Skilleting the long-tongued sniper into a cloud of smoke may be the ultimate taunt.

For the hardcore, the melee weapons are an opportunity to feel daring (perhaps reckless) and seek a new challenge—my imagination darted to attempting an axe-only run with my ablest Steam friends. But more importantly, they encourage new roles that *L4D* sorely needs; in a defensive posture, I used the frying pan's alternate attack to sweep the skillet horizontally, clearing out any infected caught in the arc—a sturdy technique for blocking doorways.

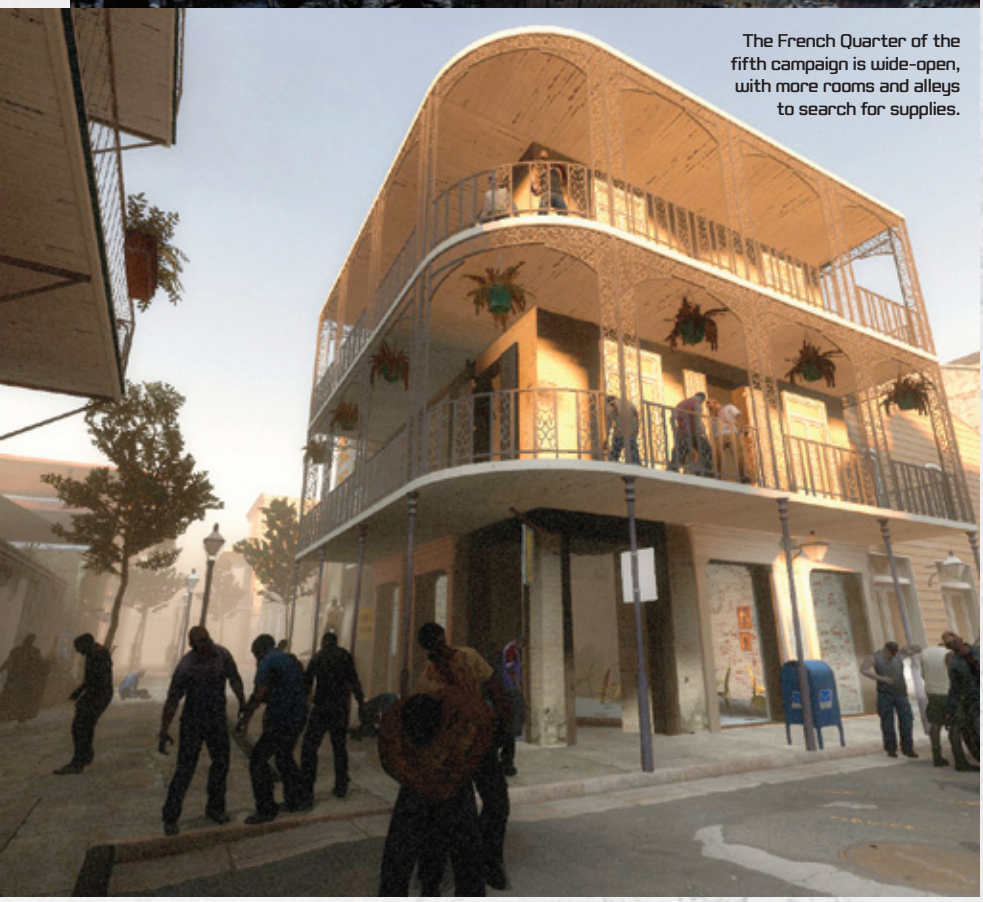
The fifth campaign's above-ground crypt maze has at least three possible routes.

Valve tells me to expect new throwables other than the pipe bomb and molotov, special ammo clips like incendiary rounds, and multiple variations of pistols, SMGs and shotguns, all of which would be improvements over *L4D*'s simple shotgun/assault rifle selection (who uses that hunting rifle, anyway?). I dual-wielded different types of pistols simultaneously (a glock and a 9mm handgun). I fired a silenced Uzi that felt nimble, with weaker shots in tighter bursts than the *L4D* variant. I loaded a small clip of incendiary rounds into our gun (10 shots for a shotgun, 50 for an SMG), and spent them wisely, waiting an extra second or two for more infected to

enter our firing cone to set more of them ablaze with a fire slug. A powerful revolver is also in the works, and Valve hinted that a bolt-action carbine might be, too.

But the oozing, sanguine layer of polish that adds even more gloss to the new weapons is enhanced dismemberment. Normal infected finally come apart like atrophied bodies should—at the right range, a buckshot burst can clip both calves off a sprinting zombie; a tomahawking axe will chop a section of skull off an infectee. "You can shoot off a chunk of his stomach, you can shoot off an arm—you can have a guy with both arms shot off still running at you. He's going to die soon, but he's got a little momentum," jokes Faliszek. For the thousands of gray bodies that *L4D* players mow through (my current average kills per hour: 313), upping the visual feedback is a welcome improvement, and it'll also apply to boss infected. No more guessing how much HP a tank has left—just take a quick glance at his bullet-eroded body.

Ah, the trailer park: a timeless magnet for doom.



The French Quarter of the fifth campaign is wide-open, with more rooms and alleys to search for supplies.

THE CHARGER

As the infection continues to mutate, so do its carriers. We don't know how many new special infected will be joining *L4D2*, but we'd wager at least four new superzombs will join the existing five. The Charger was the new one we tangled with. Zombie science may maintain that there are two types of undead—molasses-slow shamblers, and the *28 Days Later* speedsters, but the Charger is even faster. He's essentially a mini-Tank, a meleeing brute that bull-charges survivors head-on with a giant, deformed arm that knocks survivors to the ground. The effect of being hit incapacitates you for a few seconds as you slowly get to your feet—unless the Charger opts to hover over you and swing away, of course—swatting you down until a teammate comes to the rescue. In versus mode, he'll operate similarly to a Hunter; you'll need to spool his sprint ability before dashing.

ATTACK: A quick dash fronted by his oversized arm. Medium range. Successful hit sends survivors flying and incapacitates them, but they'll automatically get back to their feet after about five seconds.

BEST FRIEND: A Boomer that slimes multiple survivors, encouraging them to group together for protection so he can punch into the pack.

WORST ENEMY: Barriers and sturdy obstacles to block his stride; survivors that have the high ground.

LIKELIEST COMPLAINT AFTER HE KILLS YOU: "Son of a Witch. I thought we were fighting the undead, not juiced-up hillbilly running backs!"

ZOMBIE MATH

Comparing the Charger to his boss infected brethren with super-scientific calculations

He's faster than…

x3

Common Infected x 3

With HP like a…

x2

Smoker x 2

And hits like a…

/2

Tank / 2

But as tall as…

M-16 + M-16

And dresses better than…

Witch[Boomer]

RIGHT 2 LIVE

"I hate vans." Whiny Francis from the first *L4D* would cry all over his leather vest if he was in my shoes. I've crawled out of a sewer drain into his worst nightmare—a car impound lot. The poor parking of the now-passed has come back to haunt us; the fenced lot is filled with autos ready to beep their armed alarms. "So here's a crescendo event that we can choose to have happen to us or not," Faliszek introduces. He explains that the placement of the autos won't be fixed, but randomly determined so players can't have a route in mind when they emerge from the sewer. "Why would we *not* want it to happen?" I ask. "Well, if we avoid all the cars with the alarms—"

Oops. A thief-deterring pulse-screech cues an even louder zombie shriek. I may have hopped on that station wagon's hood without looking and alerted the horde. I'm scolded, but I try to make it up to my fellow survivors: I light a pipebomb and toss it at the other end of the lot. This sets off three more car alarms. Boy, do I feel silly.

But my error is a prime example of the way *L4D* generates positive experiences from mistakes. Missteps put the game mechanics in motion: Like the tower siren in our earlier campaign, these alarms keep going until we escape, so we need to protect each other, communicate threats, identify an exit, and make clean shots to survive. Being at risk, being rib-deep in undead, that's what I'm here for—not being cuddled by my teammates while we crouch in a protected corner.

It's a positive thread that runs through the level design in general, which trades a good portion (but not all) of the hallways, alleyways and streets that made up a fair amount of *L4D*'s campaigns for wider routes. Both of our campaigns were almost entirely set outdoors, but the swamp's mess of submerged shantytowns, wooden shacks and willow trees suffused the exploration with a sense of positive confusion—if there is such a thing. And even packed with shops, alleys and bedrooms to search for supplies, the streets of New Orleans' French Quarter still felt more open. Valve says these are the biggest maps they've ever made, too—distance-wise, they're much longer than any levels in *L4D*.

As satisfying as the impound lot's maze of autos was, it precedes an even better event—the "Gauntlet," one of multiple new finale types in *L4D2*, and hands-down the most exciting 20 minutes of gameplay I had. Your destination from the start of the fifth campaign is a suspension bridge. You reach it just before the air force is about to bomb it, and radio the military to lower the bridge so you can run across.

The bridge is still gridlocked with makes and models (and their former passengers), but we need to reach the other end. You've never navigated this dense of a level in *Left 4 Dead*—the four-lane freeway is lousy with blind corners, absent guard rails to get pushed off of, and other hazards that make it a playground for infected—if they can keep up with us.

A pair of F-18s afterburn overhead—the military's still here, not that they're of much help. Our teammate playing as Rochelle finds the back of an ambulance, hopping in to scavenge ammo and a few loose health kits.

Sunlight gives *L4D2* an immediately refreshing visual tone, but the sun can be an enemy—bright glare blocks your view if you're looking sunward.

YOKELIZATION

Left 4 Dead leaned hard on audio to convey aspects of its gameplay. Hunters growl when they're crouched and prepping a pounce; seismic thudding reminds you that a tank is about to punch you off a hospital roof. Special infected keep their signature sound bites in *L4D2*, but the characters have slightly different "accents." A Boomer might grumble a little more than he makes a blobby, barfy gargle, for example. Not only does this help build shades of distinction between the two games, but it also makes sense considering the different setting: We'd expect the infection to affect some humans a little differently than others. The terror scream-crescendo of an incoming horde was our favorite bit—the unsettling melody is similar, but instead of a piano, it's a twangy, off-key fiddle that's fitting for the south.

When we turn to reload, a tongue lassos out, dragging Rochelle from the car. The Smoker picked a fine spot: right over a broken hole in the bridge, into which he's dangling the kicking, screaming Rochelle. "Leave her!" someone calls out. We barely have time to make a judgment call—shooting the Smoker would plunge Rochelle into the sea, but leaving the Smoker alone and sacrificing our teammate will keep it occupied for a few minutes.

At the end of the maze of bumpers, we reach a helipad. Ellis shouts the Schwarzenegger-ism: "Get to the choppa!" I laugh, half-high on our escape from the gauntlet. *Valve actually included that line?* It's one we've said a dozen times at the end of *L4D*'s first campaign, No Mercy, and it's a perfect, campy endcap to our final escape. But it's a sure sign that Valve values the same stories we create in *L4D*—emergent mayhem, thinking on your feet, and gleefully overdone catchphrases.

Second to the bridge finale, the impound lot—packed with dozens of alarm-armed cars—was our favorite moment.

LEFT UNCLEAR

With the remaining special infected types, throwable weapons, and other items still unaccounted, we weigh in with our wish list for new content we'd like to see in *L4D2*.

CAMPAIGN LOCATION

RAIL STATION The survivors start the third campaign by hopping off a busted train; the high ceilings and wide rooms of a decaying railroad depot would be a good contrast to the outdoor campaigns we played.

MODE

ESCORT A VIP-like mode would slot splendidly into existing maps, just as Survival did in *L4D*. Section off a start and finish point, and see how fast survivors can ferry an unarmed AI (or unarmed player) to the finish line. Another take would be to have survivors try to escort as many survivors as they could by making multiple trips.

SPECIAL INFECTED

"HAGGARD" Artist Chris Drysdale's concept is the most conceivable boss infected we've seen. A victim of an industrial accident, Haggard hurls debris pried from his body at medium-range, letting him function as a harasser.

FIREARM

THOMPSON MACHINE GUN There's something about the Tommy's mob mystique that makes sense in the dirty south.

EXPLOSIVE

REMOTE MINE Survivors could use another option for trapping Tanks and special infected. Toss it against a wall, and blow it when the tank gets close to stun him for a few seconds.

CONSUMABLE

SMALLER BANDAGES The campaigns are longer, so giving the director another tier of health items (between pills and a medkit) to sprinkle into levels makes sense.

netbooks for Gamers

PC Gamer's guide to fun on the run with a little one

BY LOGAN DECKER

At first, it was just a few here and there. Then it began to spread, and not just on the coasts, but throughout the South, the Rust Belt and the heartland as well. PC gamers emerged from bedrooms, basements and dimly lit dens and blinked in the sunlight. They began to walk erect, backs straight and unencumbered by massive 14-pound laptops and power bricks. They sipped coffee as they played *World of WarCraft* beneath Campari umbrellas at outdoor cafes, and held silent, impromptu *Quake Live* matches during the 2:30 Biology lecture. They tortured their Sims waiting for jury duty. They played *Plants vs. Zombies* in the park.

The transition was a little scary at first, but now they're part of the growing population of PC gamers who've discovered netbooks. And they've realized that these lightweight, inexpensive portable computers aren't just insanely useful—they also offer more ways to enjoy PC gaming.

It's true that netbooks weren't intended for games, but why should that stop us when they run Windows XP and there's a world of classic PC games, web fare, independent games and even MMORPGs for which a modern desktop PC is major overkill? So in the following pages, I'm taking a look at five different netbooks—including one of the very few with a dedicated 3D accelerator—and sizing them up for their gaming prowess as well as comfort and utility. I'll also show you how to wring the most performance out of your own netbook (including a simple and safe way to instantly overclock), give you a look at the best accessories for gamers with netbooks, and then, of course, show you the very best games that run great on these brilliant little machines.

You no longer have to be chained to heavy rigs and laptops that weigh more than your schnauzer. Check out the netbooks reviewed on the following pages, and rediscover the world outside. ▶

Webcam
Nearly all netbooks have webcams built in—so they can see what you're up to.

Battery
Beware! That seductively low-priced netbook might be saddled with a lightweight three-cell battery. If you won't be hanging around an AC outlet much, opt for a longer-lasting—but also more expensive and bulkier—six-cell model instead.

Display
Although you can find them as small as seven inches, most netbook displays strike a balance between portability and viewing comfort with 10.1-inch screens and 1024x600 resolution.

Wireless Toggle
Some netbooks use hardware switches, while others use a software key combination (Fn+F11 here) to toggle among WiFi on/off and Bluetooth on/off. This switch helps you save battery life when you're not using those features.

OS
Although ultra-cheap netbooks are bundled with some variety of Linux, gamers will obviously want one with Windows XP instead (Home is fine). Few netbooks are bundled with Windows Vista, as it's difficult to get its fat ass through the door. Pre-release versions of Windows 7 do much better, though, and you can expect to see netbooks loaded with it for sale by the end of the year.

Keyboard
Netbook keyboards are generally around 83 percent to 92 percent the size of a normal keyboard. Almost all netbooks feature inverted-T arrow keys, but function keys tend to be much smaller than their counterparts on full-size keyboards.

CPU and GPU
The MSI Wind U110 pictured here includes one of the most common loadouts among netbooks: Intel's Atom processor and GMA 950 integrated graphics.

VGA Out
This connector lets you hook up your netbook to an external monitor.

Trackpad
Netbook trackpads would have to be coated with anthrax and broken glass to be less fun to use. A portable mouse (see page 64) is highly recommended.

HD or SSD
Some netbooks use a solid-state (flash memory-based) drive for storage, but most include a traditional hard drive with far more capacity.

Memory Card Slot
Memory card slots have become virtually standard among netbooks.

What's in a Netbook?
Eleven crucial features

netbook vs. netbook

All minis are not created equal. Especially not where it matters to gamers

MSI Wind U100 $379.99, MSIMOBILE.COM

Streamlined, Spartan, but not cheap-looking, the MSI Wind U100 appears to be a no-nonsense word processor and 'net surfer, but it rises to the occasion when you need a portable PC gaming machine.

The plastic chassis doesn't feel as rigid as the others and you'll wince at the tinny speakers, puny trackpad and stiff mouse button bar. On the other hand, the screen is sharp and bright, the battery life is acceptable, and the keyboard is a pleasure to use, with bezeled keys that resist clumsy typing.

You'll find the same parts more or less under the hood of the Wind as you would most other netbooks, but MSI squirted its secret sauce into the BIOS. A recent update (version 1.09) allows you to instantly overclock the Wind with the Fn+F10 key-combo while running off of AC power. It's not earth-shaking, but the additional 10 percent or so sure made a difference in *Defense Grid*, and the overclock doesn't void your warranty.

COMFORT **8** BATTERY **5** PERFORMANCE **7** FEATURES **8** VERDICT **75%**

ASUS N10J $599.99, USA.ASUS.COM

By slapping Nvidia's 9300M GPU on top of the traditional Atom and GMA 950 combo, Asus allows you to use the 9300M when you're playing games, and revert to the integrated graphics afterward to save power. The result is a netbook that can play *Half-Life 2: Episode One* at 40 frames per second, and *World of Warcraft* at a steady 25fps. You'll even get over 50fps out of *Painkiller: Battle Out of Hell*—a game that wouldn't even install on the other netbooks as they lack hardware transform and lighting (T&L). So the N10J is not only a competent netbook (with a 160GB hard drive, 802.11b/g and Bluetooth, an ExpressCard slot and even a biometric sensor), but also the brawniest gaming machine among its kin—by a mile. But it's also heavier, slightly bigger, the battery doesn't last as long even in low-power mode, and the dual graphics do a number on the price—at $599, it's a lot to pay for a netbook, and too much to pay for one GPU that's almost always off the clock.

COMFORT **8** BATTERY **4** PERFORMANCE **9** FEATURES **8** VERDICT **88%**

BENCHMARKS

Model	Price	Resolution	CPU/GPU	RAM, Storage	Connectivity	3DMark06	Defense Grid	WoW
ASUS N10J	$599.99	1024 x 600	Intel Atom N270, GMA 950/Nvidia 9300M	1GB RAM, 160GB HD	802.11b/g, Bluetooth	1583	37	25
Lenovo S10 IdeaPad	$399.99	1024 x 600	Intel Atom N270, GMA 950		802.11b/g, Bluetooth	N/A	5	12
Asus Eee PC	$399.99	1024 x 600			802.11b/g/n, Bluetooth	94	5	12
Acer Aspire One	$349.99	1024 x 600			802.11b/g	115	6	14
MSI Wind U100	$379.99	1024 x 600		1GB RAM, 80GB HD	802.11b/g, Bluetooth	119	6	12

Lenovo S10 IdeaPad $399.99, LENOVO.COM

Like a competent but meek junior manager, the S10 IdeaPad from Lenovo doesn't try hard to stand out. The keyboard is well-designed and comfortable to use, even at long stretches, but the trackpad and mouse buttons are so tiny that they look like a practical joke. The S10 IdeaPad isn't an affront to the eyes, but it's also not particularly good-looking. The matte 10.2-inch screen is bright, but also slightly coarser than other displays. Battery life is—guess what?—average.

The S10 IdeaPad forces you to look really hard to find something to appreciate in itself, but look hard enough and you will find something. The IdeaPad was one of only two netbooks in this roundup to include an ExpressCard slot—and the cheaper netbook between the two by a mile. Suddenly, a notoriously limited and change-averse netbook can be upgraded with sound processors, memory card readers, docking stations, even ExpressCard-based RAM. Holy mackerel—that's pretty cool.

COMFORT **5** BATTERY **5** PERFORMANCE **5** FEATURES **8** VERDICT **61%**

ASUS Eee PC 1000HE $399.99, USA.ASUS.COM

The once-microscopic Eee PC keyboard that forced you to riverdance nervously with your fingertips is now a chiclet-style keyboard that's generously spaced, but keys have a disconcertingly shallow travel distance that's hard to get used to. The size and the proportions of the trackpad feel just right, but it can't be used while keys are depressed—an infuriating oversight.

The chassis is constructed of sturdy plastic with no flexion, and unlike most of the other netbooks in this roundup, the Eee PC uses Intel's Atom N280 processor instead of the N270. The performance wasn't exceptional in games, but the battery life was excellent, and the Eec PC was the fastest of the bunch to wake up (plus you can boot in seconds to the ExpressGate OS for a quick email check).

The biggest knock against the Eee PC is the lackluster matte 10.1-inch display, which was drearily dim and dull even at full brightness and on AC power.

COMFORT **5** BATTERY **8** PERFORMANCE **7** FEATURES **8** VERDICT **74%**

Acer Aspire One $349.99, US.ACER.COM

The Aspire One from Acer tempts gamers with a glossy screen and a *phenomenal* six-cell battery. Not even the diminutive keyboard can hold the Aspire One back: despite keys that are the second-to-smallest of our bunch, typing isn't frustrating thanks to the sharply bezeled shapes. The screen is particularly sweet; colors are vivid but not harsh and whites are very crisp. The sluggish trackpad, however, is perfectly matched to the reluctant mouse button bar—treat yourself to an external mouse and accept it as a tradeoff for the Aspire One's other qualities: good looks, fast wake-up time, a passable set of speakers, and battery life so far ahead of the competition that I had to test it twice to be sure my eyes weren't deceiving me.

Gaming performance was near the top of the pack also (at this level, that's admittedly splitting hairs). Only that awful trackpad prevents the Aspire One from being the ideal pinch hitter for gamers.

COMFORT **5** BATTERY **9** PERFORMANCE **8** FEATURES **6** VERDICT **86%**

Boot Camp for Netbooks

Nine tricks to tune up your netbook for gaming!

You can't stuff a GeForce GTX 295 into a netbook, but there are plenty of things that you can do to wring out every last precious drop of power from lean hardware—and altogether, they can turn a choppy slideshow into a playable game. Here are nine simple and low-to-no-risk tips for a faster gaming netbook.

Add more RAM

Many netbooks offer an option to upgrade to 2GB of RAM. Take it. Going from one to two gigabytes won't do much for your framerates, but it will take a lot of the pain out of task-switching. You can do the upgrade later yourself, but it may void the warranty.

Buy an SSD

Consider swapping out the hard drive for a lower-capacity solid-state model when you order your netbook, especially if you've already got a lot of external storage. Again, not a big framerate booster, but it does wonders for level loads.

Run GMABooster

Of all the tips on this page, using the simple, safe and effective overclocking utility GMABooster (free, www.gmabooster.com) is the one that can actually translate into honest-to-Ceiling-Cat framerate increases if you're using a compatible chipset (and you probably are).

Run CCleaner

Basically a high-colonic for your operating system, CCleaner (free, www.ccleaner.com) rampages through your OS and flushes out all the temp files, orphaned files, logs, invalid shortcuts, and other detritus. Clean PCs are faster, more responsive PCs.

Turn off Search Indexing (XP)

A major resource hog—turn it off. Click Start, and enter services.msc in the Run dialog box. Locate Indexing Service in the right-hand pane and double-click it. Now select Manual or Disabled in the "Startup type" drop-menu.

Flush out startup programs

Click Start, then enter msconfig in the Run dialog box. Click on the Startup tab, and use your common sense to tweeze out unnecessary apps by clicking on the check box. Then restart. Recheck them to reverse changes.

Disable NTSF last access

Windows XP changes the time stamp of every folder it detects—unnecessary if you don't run remote backups. Click start, enter cmd in the Run dialog box. Now type "fsutil behavior set disablelastaccess 1" at the command prompt, and restart.

Dial down the eye candy

The idea is to keep your OS minimal, light and out of the way of your games. Right-click on My Computer, select Properties, and click on the Advanced Tab. Click the Performance button, then click on the "Adjust for best performance" radio button.

Defrag once a week!

So simple, yet so many people neglect this tip, which can keep your hard drive from grinding away trying to shuffle files around (and draining the battery in the process). No need to defrag solid-state drives, though—another plus in their column.

Netbook Powerups

A few well-chosen accessories can round out the rough edges on any netbook

With their tiny trackpads, tightwad storage and unusual size, the compromises of using a netbook begin to grate on day one. But they don't have to—here are a few essential accessories that turn an everyday netbook into a portable PC gaming station.

8x External Slim DVD Writer

PC GAMER EDITORS' CHOICE

Installing disc-based apps and games on netbooks is a drag—unless you happen to have a USB-powered optical drive. Oh—looky! Lite-On's external drive reads from and writes to CDs and DVDs (rip 'n go!) entirely on USB power, and even supports image burning to groovy LightScribe media. And it's small enough to fit in the pocket of your pants. Well, *cargo* pants.
$79.99, us.liteonit.com

Edge Ultra Portable Netbook Messenger Bag

The netbook compartment in the handsome bag is adjustable so your little friend doesn't jostle too much, and the shoulder strap is made of a soft, stretchy, extraterrestrial material that's incredibly comfy. Plus, you could spend a weekend counting all the pockets in the interior.
$49.99, www.mobileedge.com

Netbook Mini Instant Messenger

If you run the TSA gauntlet often, you'll appreciate this bag which separates the netbook from your accessories when laid out flat so, in theory, you shouldn't have to remove it going through the airport security lines. There are lots of pockets, but it gets heavy when they're used.
$39.99, www.solocases.com

Retractable Travel Mouse

PC GAMER EDITORS' CHOICE

Belkin's mini-est of minis is a perfect match for a netbook. The cable retracts neatly, it's inexpensive, it tracks accurately, and despite the ultra-diminutive chassis, it's still more pleasant to use than a trackpad.
$14.99, www.belkin.com

Bluetooth Notebook Mouse 5000

Microsoft's Notebook Mouse 5000 has excellent tracking and good battery life, but it's a bit heavy in the rump and only has a single thumb button. Nonetheless, it's a Bluetooth mouse—why mess with an easy-to-lose wireless transceiver if you don't have to?
$49.95, www.microsoft.com/hardware

MaxFire Pandora Pro

This folding controller from Genius is less than four inches wide and weighs just a hair over an ounce, yet it still packs eight buttons, a directional stick, an auto-fire toggle and even vibration effects. Includes a retractable USB cable.
$19.99, www.geniusnet.com

Explorer Mini Mouse

PC GAMER EDITORS' CHOICE

The first portable mouse with Microsoft's BlueTrack technology tracks very finely over even rough, grainy or uneven surfaces (including my leg). Better still are the USB transceiver that snaps into the mouse itself (simultaneously turning it off), smooth-scrolling mouse wheel, well-designed dual thumb buttons and the extraordinary battery life.
$59.95, www.microsoft.com/hardware

slotBaron

Light and sleek, the slotBaron has "urban ninja" written all over it. You can whip out your netbook in less than two seconds, and the exterior pockets are covered in a stretchy space-age fabric that holds your stuff securely without making you fight an epic zipper battle to retrieve it.
$75.90, www.urbantool.com

the netbook arcade

10 great games to play on a netbook

Go into any urban coffeehouse these days and you'll see scads of men and women hunched over their netbook screens. Know what they're doing? Playing *Diablo II*.

OK, maybe not all of them. But why not? We don't care whether or not this is what netbooks were intended for. They've got screens, they've got keyboards, so they ought to be playing games. Of course, some games won't run on netbooks at all, while others will run more like filmstrips than interactive entertainment. But there are plenty of PC games—classic, indie, casual and even a few triple-A games of recent vintage—that run great on netbooks and their integrated graphics. PC Gamer toured the archives and test drove some of our favorite games to see which ones fared best on even the leanest of our netbooks.

Diablo II

$19.99, blizzard.com

What is it?

Blizzard's era-defining hack'n'slash RPG. With action that requires the concentration span of a goldfish with Alzheimer's, hotkeys that our hands' muscle memory will never forget, randomly generated level layouts and a constant succession of quickly resolved challenges and rewards, it's perfectly suited play for both low-spec machines and the stop-start nature of gaming on the move.

Any tips?

If you do find you're nevertheless short on time, patience or room, try the ridiculously excessive and somewhat divisive Median XL mod (http://modsbylaz.planetdiablo.gamespy.com/). It chucks in a crapton of extra monsters, quests and skills—but more importantly, an ungodly amount of loot.

Plants vs Zombies

$9.99, popcap.com

What is it?

All that stands between zombies and your brains is a mutated array of plants and seeds. This gloriously silly take on the tower defense genre may be a thoroughly 2009 game, but it plays cheerfully on a netbook. 2D, low resolution, controlled with just a single hand and with challenges that rarely last more than five minutes or so, it's also ideal for the limited maneuverability and regular distractions inherent to train or plane gaming.

Any tips?

In the unlikely event you suffer any stuttering on your teeny machine, simply turn off the 3D acceleration option, which disables a few of the sparkly effects but otherwise leaves the game unchanged.

World of Goo

$20.00, 2dboy.com/games.php

What is it?

The idea is to build bridges, cables and carriages from sentient, slightly dopey goos in the guts of monsters. It plays like a charm on even the most low-spec netbook. One-button, broad gesture-based controls make it a comfortable play on a netbook trackpad too.

Any tips?

This physics-based puzzle game doesn't let you change its resolution, which is an issue with netbooks. No prob—look in C:\Program Files\world of goo\properties, or C:\Program Files\Steam\steamapps\common\world of goo\properties if you bought it off Steam, and open up config.txt in Notepad. You can manually specify a resolution there—but take a backup of the file first, as some resolutions make the game go haywire.

GTA: Vice City

$9.99, store.steampowered.com

What is it?

Rockstar's 80s-themed *Grand Theft Auto* remains far more than the sum of its graphical parts thanks to all those exaggerated neon and pastel stylings. This means it's a game that runs incredibly smoothly on even the most barebones of netbooks while still looking fantastic. Even on a tiny screen, that opening moped journey to the strains of "Billie Jean" is still one of modern videogaming's most joyous moments.

Any tips?

As long as you turn on "widescreen" in the graphics options, you'll be able to select your netbook's native resolution—a pleasant surprise, given how many games don't support 800x480 or 1024x600.

Deus Ex

$9.99, store.steampowered.com

What is it?

A classic tale of conspiracy, landmines and modified humans in a world where nanobots, greasels and angry Templars rule.

Any tips?

The original Unreal engine tech doesn't natively support 800x480 or 1024x600, but there's a fairly easy fix. Head into the game's install directory (in Program Files\Eidos if you're using a boxed copy or Steam\Steam apps\common if you've got the Steam version), click through to the System folder, then open deusex.ini in Notepad. Find these lines: FullscreenViewportX= and FullscreenViewportY=, then change the number at the end of the former to 1024 (or 800) and the latter to 600 (or 480). Save, and Ion Storm's finest hour will be running happily at your netbook's native resolution.

Quake Live beta

Free, quakelive.com

What is it?

The classic first-person shooter that once brought the brawniest of systems to their knees now runs meekly in your browser. The beta includes five game modes plus bot practice and a customizable games browser for finding the perfect match anytime.

Any tips?

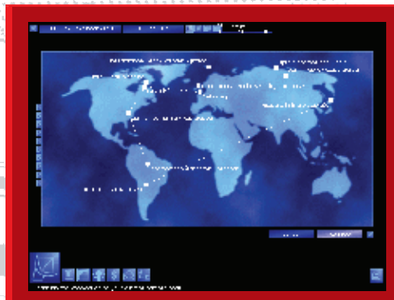
Netbooks don't meet the minimum 1024x768 resolution requirements for *Quake Live*,

but don't sweat it—it works and looks just fine at 1024x600. If your netbook is struggling, click on Game Settings in the browser window, then click on the Game Settings tab, and then click on that faint, grayed-out Advanced button, and you'll find tweakable video settings.

Uplink

$9.99, store.steampowered.com

What is it?



Uplink (left) is nothing like real computer hacking. Instead, it's what computer hacking *should* be like, with harrowing Hollywood-style missions that have you infiltrating systems, stealing data, wrecking databases and framing hapless marks while covering your tracks to avoid detection.

Any tips?

If you purchase *Uplink* through Steam, buy it with *Darwinia* (right) for $14.99—a great deal for two spectacular, innovative games that work great on netbooks. Darwinia's gesture-based controls—in which you draw shapes in order to issue commands to your tiny army of squads and engineers—are particularly well-suited to trackpads.

Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos

$19.99, www.blizzard.com

What is it?

Blizzard's most recent real-time strategy game, and the precursor to *World of Warcraft*, is the best-suited of their games to the netbook, with chunky units and crammed levels that focus on hero characters. Once you're done with the main campaign, the *Frozen Throne* expansion brings closure, and more awesome, to the story.

Any tips?

Warcraft III doesn't support netbooks' oddball widescreen resolutions, but if you want to avoid screen-scrolling or a compressed picture, you can edit the Registry to force a custom resolution. You'll find instructions at http://snipurl.com/hybyk. Also be sure to apply the most recent *Warcraft III* patch, as it officially rips out the CD-check, meaning you can run the game from your hard drive without a crack. Woo!

TrackMania Nations Forever

Free, www.trackmania.com

What is it?

The tech at the core of the *Trackmania* series hasn't changed since the original release in 2003, which means even the most recent version can make itself at home on netbooks. You'll likely need to drop the visual settings way down, to the point that it may look like a PlayStation 1 game as a result, but the action is right and the framerate's strong.

Any tips?

Unlike most racing games, *TrackMania*'s positively built to be controlled with WASD or cursor keys, so you don't need to fret over breaking out a gamepad on the train. Immediately accessible, super-quick levels and inherently one-handed high-speed driving and stunting: *Trackmania* could even be *the* defining netbook game.

Audiosurf

$9.99, store.steampowered.com

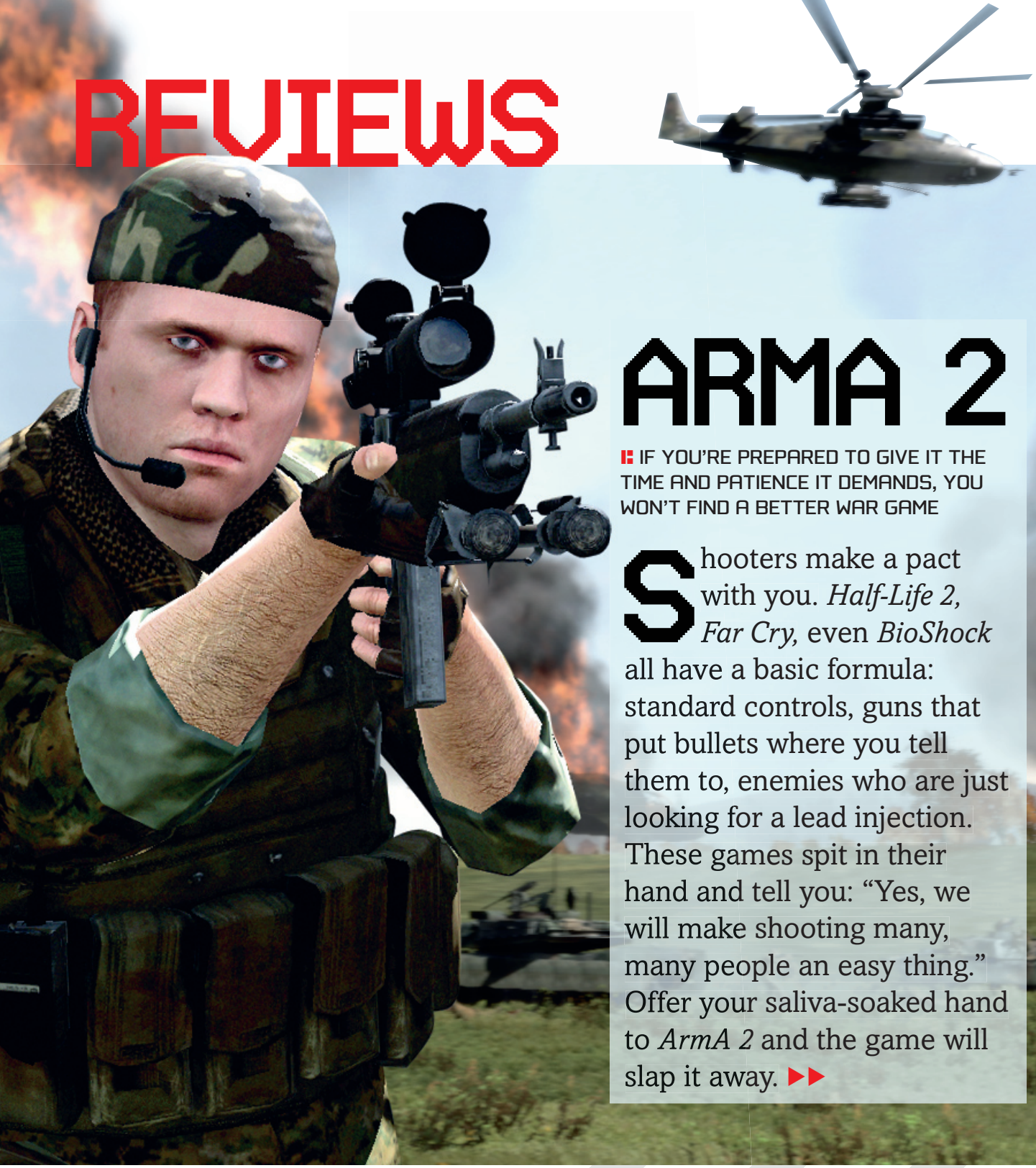
What is it?

Match colored blocks as you ride along rollercoasters defined by your favorite music. It's a lifesaver on long, boring journeys, as it combines two of the most reliable tedium-killers—gaming and music. Load up MP3s of your choice, then attempt a sort of future-racing/match-3 puzzle gaming hybrid in pursuit of ever-escalating high scores.

Any tips?

You may need to drop the graphics settings pretty low, and one slight wrinkle is that it can take a little while to analyze a song when you run it for the first time, so you're best off loading your favorite songs when you've got a little time to kill.

REVIEWS



ARMA 2

IF YOU'RE PREPARED TO GIVE IT THE TIME AND PATIENCE IT DEMANDS, YOU WON'T FIND A BETTER WAR GAME

Shooters make a pact with you. *Half-Life 2*, *Far Cry*, even *BioShock* all have a basic formula: standard controls, guns that put bullets where you tell them to, enemies who are just looking for a lead injection. These games spit in their hand and tell you: "Yes, we will make shooting many, many people an easy thing." Offer your saliva-soaked hand to *ArmA 2* and the game will slap it away. ▶▶

HOW WE RATE THE GAMES

0–30%
INTOLERABLE
A crime against gaming. Whether it's bugs or bad design, this should be shot on sight.

31–45%
WEAK
Serious flaws ruin any chance this game has of offering sustained fun.

46–60%
MEDIOCRE
A very ordinary game, quickly forgotten. Think twice even if you find it cheap.

61–75%
FAIR
A decent effort that, but for a little more polish, coulda been a contender.

76–89%
GOOD
Enjoyable, well-made and entertaining—just falling short of true greatness.

90%+
EDITOR'S CHOICE
Oozing class, this is the work of experts at the top of their game. Bravo, sirs!

This chopper is yours to call in during the opening missions.

Somewhere in this shot there are camouflaged soldiers.

▶▶ If you want easy, go somewhere else. What you'll get in *ArmA 2* is a soldier's worst nightmare. Before you know it you're the leader of a four-man squad, creeping through the darkest night you can possibly imagine, crouch-running through a village looking for a hidden transmitter and hoping you'll get out without seeing the slightest movement. Movement means people. Enemies, civilians: both bad. Bullets fly. You push yourself to find any cover—even corpses provide some—and hope your squad's out of enemy sight. Orders are barked and the map is hastily checked. It only takes one bullet to kill you, and to catch one means you've done something wrong. You will die.

> On the ground I tend to crunch people under tank tracks

ArmA 2 is the latest in the hardcore soldier sim series that began with 2001's *Operation: Flashpoint* and continued in 2007's *ArmA: Armed Assault*. Both turned the relatively simple notion (in gaming at least) of moving through a battlefield into a complicated series of button gymnastics. In Bohemia Interactive's games, war isn't a scripted series of dramatic setpieces, but a fluid, dangerous and sometimes stunning approximation of a soldier's life.

This time we're in the politically complex faux state of Chernarus, a dynamic world that, at 225 square kilometers, is larger than a game this detailed has any right to be. The Americans are attempting to stabilize the region, but Chernarus's multiple factions are doing their best to tear it apart. At its best, *ArmA 2* will leave you with war stories to tell, vivid, unexpected fights to describe and a world to explore. The flipside is the weight of the simulation crushing what's underneath. Without structure and direction, *ArmA 2* is liable to break like the previous games did.

The single-player game escalates at a slow pace, putting your small team through scene-setting missions that take you from squad leader to commander of an entire army.

The four-man team you're part of is a recon squad that will stick together throughout the campaign. You're in charge of the team's movements. Nearly every FPS finger-memory you have will betray you: the number keys, the preserve of weapons/powers in other games, are what you use to control your squad. Every number brings up a menu, enabling you to set such things as combat state, formation or team configuration. You go to select a shotgun and instead you're given the option to split the team into color coded groups. As they say: RTFM.

LOSING CONTROL

Yet every menu that pops up brings you a little closer to understanding what *ArmA 2* is all about: control. As the squad leader, you have to make decisions on the fly to make the squad function. You're up against good AI: they zig-zag when fleeing, they aim carefully when shooting. You have to be careful at all times. Paranoid, even. You simply must have an absolute level of control over how your team approaches combat situations. The interface, how you tell them to move to a specific building in a particular way, is 80 percent great. The missing 20 percent? When the action heats up, the same setup seems rigid and unhelpful. *ArmA 2*'s ordering system is many things, but it's not quick. It takes time and a lot of effort to be comfortable with. In dangerous situations you have to think your way out of trouble. If my panicked stabs at the number keys and the map are anything to go by, the system could do with some refining. There's an easy "regroup" command, but tactically it doesn't cut it, particularly when the AI decides to have a bit of a quiet moment to itself.

WAR OF GEARS

I spent most of my time in vehicles deferring to computer control, as the complicated nuances of landing a jet or chopper are beyond my grasp. On the ground I tend to crunch up people under tank tracks, and I'm not the only one who has that trouble: At the start of one mission, as I listened to a colonel lay out the situation and telling me what I could do to help his garrison, an APC was

Live the life of a soldier in gaming's biggest battlefield.

Chernarus has some killer single-track mountainbike trails, apparently.

WORLD OF PAIN

All other shooters pale in comparison

REGION
Not Iraq, not WWII. 225km² of forested Eastern Europe.

FACTIONS
Six, including Russia, the US and local warlords.

FREEDOM
...on where to go and how to approach missions.

DYNAMIC AI
Brilliant when it works, but it can get stuck.

IN THE ARMORY

***Arma 2*'s massive sandbox lets you play with every in-game item**

It's pretty, but the forest conceals trees. And bad guys with big guns.

driving backward and forward behind me, dangerously close to my character and the brass's tent. The AI was acting like a student driver trying to make a three-point turn. In the end it crushed another tent, leaving a square of grass and a desk. It looked like modern art.

But this is a problem that has dogged both *Op Flash* and *ArmA*, and *ArmA 2* is more ambitious than the pair of them. Its country is full of enemies, armies and insurgents, switching from urban and countryside warfare. You can get in a helicopter, fly halfway across the map, get out and find someone to fight. Of *course* it breaks. If there's one thing I'd beg of Bohemia, it's to take a good look at the AI.

The inconsistency is more than comedic: there are frozen enemies, stuck allies, ridiculous vehicle crashes and awkward movement to contend with. It never functions 100 percent correctly, and makes the fidelity they're striving so hard for impossible to achieve. After all that work to make a believable world, the beautiful graphics and astonishing sound, it's a kick in the teeth to allow the game to break. NPCs representing trained soldiers shouldn't be killing tents as often as they kill the enemy.

The AI demonstrates what happens if you operate heavy machinery while on cold meds.

Even so, the fighting is remarkable. There are three stances in *ArmA 2*: standing, couching and lying. If you're standing when the combat begins, you're doing it wrong. It's terrifying. Bohemia's AI is so economical with bullets you can count the number of shots fired. It makes you think about movement: when, how, even if you should. Crawling along under bullet fire, hearing that twig-like crack from the gun and the high-pitched ping of the impact on the wall behind you is fundamentally scary as hell. It says:

NPCs representing trained soldiers shouldn't be killing tents as often as they kill the enemy

"Whatever's out there knows exactly what it's doing, and God help you if you make a mistake." There's no comfort zone.

It makes survival that much more exciting. If you look up "accomplishment" in the dictionary it'll explain what the word means. But the feeling you have after wiggling your way out of a tight situation... that's the real thing.

Missions are meted out by superior officers, but you'll be given multiple objectives to do as and when you please. One asked me to patrol a wooded area, looking for scout camps and the main camp of a local warlord. You're given the area to patrol—a massive chunk of forest and hills by any normal game's standard—and some orders.

The rest relies on your understanding of the provided intel, an ability to prioritize and a calm, patient approach. You're not led through the space, you don't have any

CONFESSIONS OF THE OOPSY-DAISY KILLER...

Every battle is unscripted, so anything can happen.

overriding orders other than your own initiative, and this is precisely the reason to play *ArmA 2*.

During my patrol, things got nasty. I blundered across an insurgent camp because I was using the freelook camera to admire the gorgeous forestry. My team was given permission to engage and we slaughtered the little squad easily enough, but I was too focused to notice a truck moving in from the rear. One of my squad screamed and his icon turned a worrying shade of red. I hit the grass and desperately summoned the map screen to see what I'd missed. Soldiers were fanning out from the truck, I was one man down and face first in the dirt. The camouflaged enemy were only visible thanks to their movements, so I was shooting where they'd been, not where they were. Squad members were shouting positions and returning fire. Fubar.

ArmA 2 does this a lot. The chaos of war is never as loud or scripted as *Call of Duty* makes it feel. It's just you trying to outthink a capable, deadly enemy. I died and restarted. In the second patrol, I was given an order to help and assist with a downed helicopter that never occurred in the first playthrough. Dynamically generated missions? Brilliant!

EDITING THE WAR

If the main set of missions isn't enough (and it won't be), you can use the game's editor to create a single or multiplayer mission anywhere on the map. Feed the game intro and outro conditions, plonk down some enemies, bases and vehicles and set the thing in motion. It can be done via a simple UI: load up a multiplayer server, and there's an option for a wizard that'll help you create and host a game. It's as easy or as diverse as you want it to be. Slightly more complicated sessions can be created in the editor, setting waypoints for troops and vehicles.

Higher-end players will find a scripting language in-game of frightening exactitude. If you do pick up *ArmA 2*, this is where you'll find yourself six to 12 months from now. It extends the game to a ludicrous degree, giving you freedom to create whatever scenarios you choose.

BASE-BUILDING

Multiplayer is another boon. The games can be as small or as big as you choose. For example, there's been a shift in *ArmA* 1, dictated by its remarkable community, toward an RTS-style of multiplayer game that takes advantage of the massive landmass. The commander builds a base, helicopter pilots ferry ground troops, jets scream overhead. It's never as simple as deathmatch: there are ongoing campaigns between factions, with multiple objectives, squads, even civilians. This community has sustained Bohemia since *Op Flash,* generating missions, fixes, new islands, new factions and more for both games. Buying *ArmA 2* with an expectation of more of the same would be a good investment.

Yet *ArmA 2* has issues beyond the occasionally twitchy AI. Most importantly the engine and technology only felt smooth on my office PC: an overclocked, water-cooled mammoth. On my more modest Core 2 Duo Q6600, Radeon 4870-powered PC at home, it struggled to top 20 frames per second. I still feel the UI needs a complete overhaul to make the experience smoother—it's fine being complicated, but I see no need to grapple with the multiple button presses and myriad menus.

Yet *ArmA 2* continually wowed me. I subjected my squad to frequent helicopter rides just to sit watching the world pass below, wondering what would happen if I ordered the chopper pilot to drop us off in the villages below. One mission was interrupted by one of our recon planes being shot out of the sky by a rocket, which had nothing to do with anything. I've wandered through forests to stumble across tank battles in full swing without me.

The single-player story genuinely takes the *ArmA* series and war games to new places, and the multiplayer, although I've not yet had the pleasure of a 50-plus player battle, has all it needs to bring you back when you're done. Even a 10-minute fiddle in the editor gives you something fun to do.

If *ArmA 2* hooks you in, you've just found a war game capable of providing infinite entertainment, and that's astonishing. CRAIG PERSON

CHOREOGRAPHING THE ASSAULT

How to build a spectacular battle in under 10 minutes

1 First, double-click where you want your unit to be on the map. This dialogue will pop up enabling you to select the unit's side, type, state and the direction it'll face.

2 Place him. Then, using the same method, add some friendly tanks surrounding him. Make sure they're all on your side or you'll be instantly shot at.

3 Now select an enemy faction, and place some helicopters around the area. Ctrl+C and Ctrl+V to cut and paste. Set the Helicopter's state to "flying."

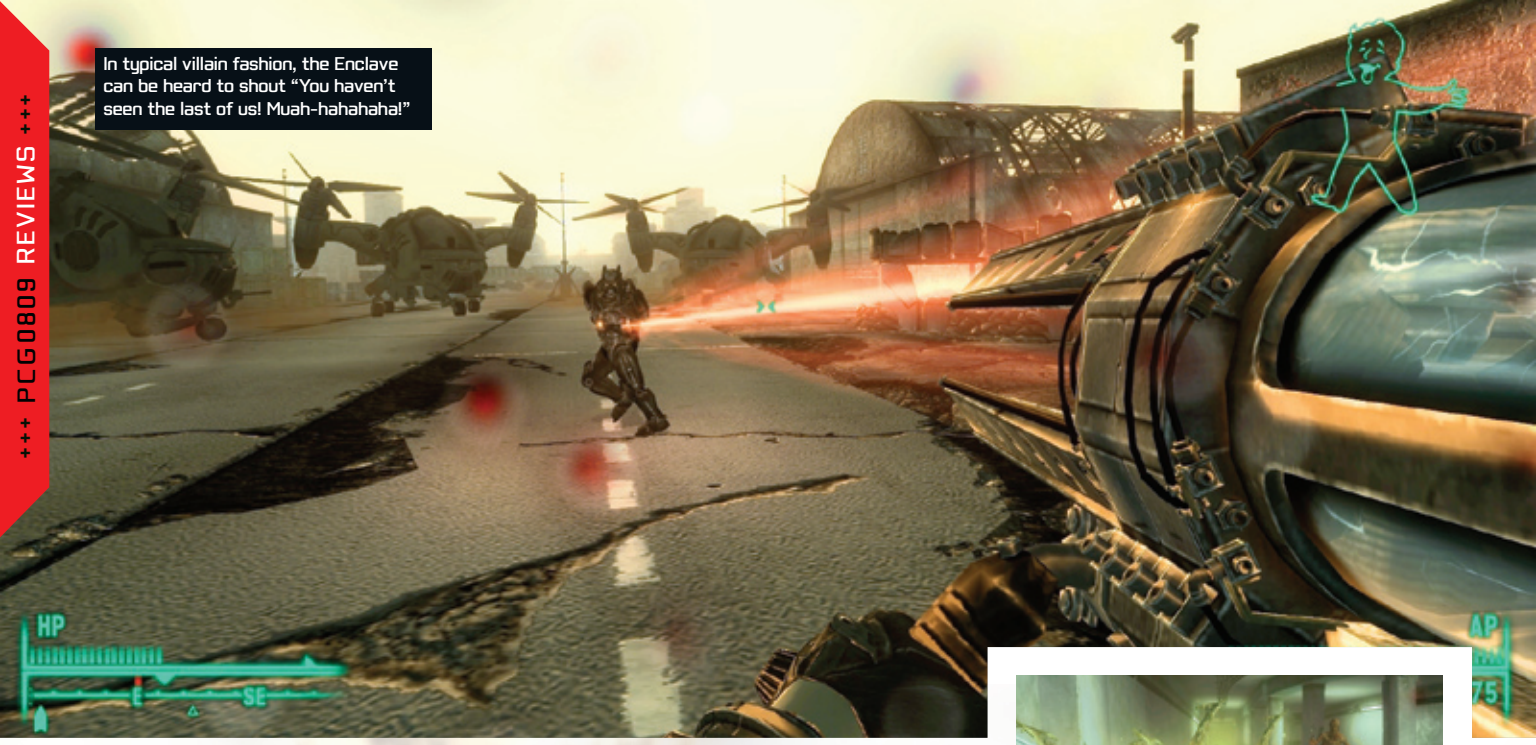
4 Voila. Violence! Now tweak. Vary the distances, directions, types. You have a massive country to utilize, and all the game's units to place. Yes, even bunnies.

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

BOTTOM LINE// A brilliantly in-depth and vast war simulator that rewards your patience. But buyer beware: this game has AI issues.

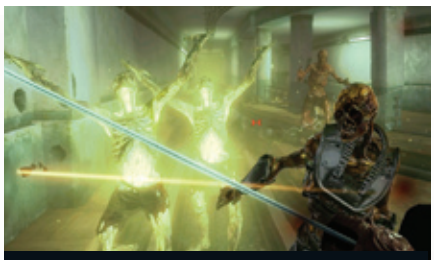
++ GOOD ++

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** A hardcore military sim, striving for realism above all else. **INFLUENCED BY** *Operation: Flashpoint*, the harsh realities of war **PLAY IT ON** Quad-Core 3GHz CPU, 4GB RAM, 1GB GeForce GTX280, Radeon 4870 X2 **ALTERNATIVELY** *ArmA: Armed Assault* [70%] **COPY PROTECTION** CD key with online activation **EXPECT TO PAY** $40 **RELEASE** July **PUBLISHER** IDEA Games **DEVELOPER** Bohemia Interactive **MULTIPLAYER** online co-op, up to 50 **LINK** arma2.com **ESRB** M



In typical villain fashion, the Enclave can be heard to shout "You haven't seen the last of us! Muah-hahahaha!"

FALLOUT 3: Broken Steel



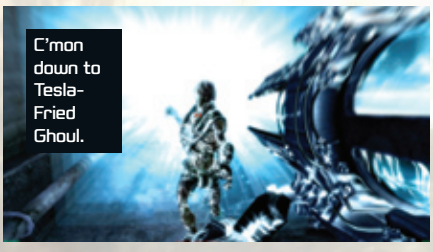
Ghoul reavers come with backup dancers.

THE THIRD CHUNK OF DLC MAKES THE FIRST TWO LOOK LIKE SIDE QUESTS

PC GAMER EDITORS' CHOICE

I could tell that *Fallout 3* was a great game by how annoyed I was by the game's abrupt ending after I completed the main quest. I wanted to keep adventuring in its enormous world with my character that I'd come to love, and to earn rewards doing it rather than banging my head against the level 20 cap. With *Broken Steel*, Bethesda has squashed that complaint, closed an enormous plot hole in the ending, and reopened the world of *Fallout* for many, many more hours of glorious supermutant-mulching.

You begin by loading up the last saved game before you completed the main quest in *Fallout 3* and go through the motions of entering the key code into Project Purity. But this time, your character wakes up two weeks later to help the Brotherhood of Steel finish mopping up the remains of the Enclave. The ensuing action-heavy quest chain sends you into a nest of Deathclaws and up against a legion of Enclave soldiers, and equips you with some new hardware including the powerful electric Tesla cannon and Enclave heavy incinerator. All of the new content is polished to the standards of the main game, which is to say very well-designed with some good role-playing choices (including a great opportunity for betrayal), but not without a few quirky but non-game-stopping glitches. Those quests will last you a solid six hours if you're savoring their moments, and on top of that there are a few additional new side quests scattered around, such as escorting water caravans.



C'mon down to Tesla-Fried Ghoul.

BUT EVEN MORE EXCITING than the new quests is the level cap boost from 20 to 30, allowing you to go back and do the quests you missed in *Fallout 3* (since you can only do about half of them before hitting 20), lured by a fresh set of clever perks to make the time spent earning them worth your while. Standouts include Nuka Chemist, which converts every 10 Nuka-Colas in your inventory into one Nuka-Cola Quantum, and Puppies!, which spawns a new Dogmeat at Vault 101 in the event of the untimely death of your best friend.

Of course, by the time you're halfway to the new cap, you're practically a god—far too powerful for all but the strongest of enemies to pose any threat. New super-powered ghoul reavers and supermutant overlords will give you a run for your money, but otherwise the lack of danger in combat drops the tension level. But if you're in it for the exploration, this mini-expansion basically doubles the amount of time you can spend walking the Earth, doing what you do. And with *Fallout 3*, that has always been the very best part. DAN STAPLETON

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** A downloadable add-on that adds new quests and raises the level cap of an amazing role-playing game. **INFLUENCED BY** *Fallout*, an adverse reaction to horse armor **PLAY IT ON** Any PC that can play *Fallout 3* and is connected to the internet **ALTERNATIVELY** *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (95%) **COPY PROTECTION** None **EXPECT TO PAY** $10 (800 Microsoft Points) **RELEASE** Out now **PUBLISHER** Bethesda/Microsoft Games for Windows Live Marketplace **DEVELOPER** Bethesda **MULTIPLAYER** None **LINK** fallout.bethsoft.com **ESRB** M

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

Broken Steel enhances the entire *Fallout 3* world with new items, quests, perks and monsters rather than tacking on a new corner, and extends an awesome experience.

0% BETTER >> 100% **90%**

++ EDITORS' CHOICE ++

After hours on a frozen ship, you suddenly end up here with no explanation.

Cryostasis

IT'S EASY TO AVOID THIS SLOW-MOVING SURVIVAL HORROR

A Russian ice-breaker ship has become marooned in the arctic. In order to discover how and why, you'll brave freezing temperatures, fight inexplicably zombified former sailors and tediously trod through 5,000 identical metal chambers. And in the end you'll still be fuzzy about that whole "why" question.

Each of the gray, frozen rooms is filled with equally gray, frozen objects. Most rooms are devoid of any life, threatening or friendly—in fact, one level keeps you marching along with nothing but flashback videos to keep you company—but occasionally there's also an electrical switch that triggers a predictable zombie attack.

> Combat is literally less entertaining than watching ice melt

These zombie designs are hellish and creepy—former jailors' faces have been replaced with glowing cell doors with their collection of keys stuck in their teeth (a bit on-the-nose, isn't it?), while other crewmembers have sprouted icy spider legs (OK, that makes no sense)—but the feeble combat system lacks even the basic ability to determine if you've shot a target in the head or the toe, so the dull weapons require only a point-in-that-general-direction level of aim. The result is combat that's literally less entertaining than watching ice melt.

For example, instead of health in combat, you lose warmth, and must restore it by huddling near lamps, toasters and other objects conveniently placed between encounters. The game's dynamic heat system works with the graphics engine to produce some impressive effects—ice collects on the screen and then melts away in the heat.

Cryostasis' lone bright spot of cleverness is your ability to relive the last moments of frozen corpses you come across and change the outcome. You'll encounter these bodies at a dead-end and find that undoing their mistakes opens up a path for you in the present as well. These flashbacks are easily the liveliest part of the game, teasing you with creative activities at a time when the ship's hallways held some promise of interesting gameplay. Among many things, you work with machinery, ride a boat, fight hit-and-run zombies underwater, control a lamp to track enemies so your buddy can shoot them and even live the last moments of a cow at a slaughterhouse. These intriguing snippets of the past would have been a grand opportunity to string together a larger plot that fully explains the zombification of the crew, but sadly the game fails to capitalize on it. JOSH AUGUSTINE

Aim for the legs, or don't; they'll fall off anyway.

Praise be unto Lightbulb, for He is warm!

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

Dull combat, countless boring gray rooms and an abandoned story make *Cryostasis* as appealing as frozen dog droppings.

0% BETTER >> 100% — 49%

++ MEDIOCRE ++

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** A survival horror shooter set on board a frozen ship whose inhabitants have turned into icy zombie-like creatures. **INFLUENCED BY** *John Carpenter's The Thing* **PLAY IT ON** 2.6GHz Dual-Core CPU, 2GB RAM, 256MB Geforce 8800 GT **ALTERNATIVELY** *Dead Space* (81%) **COPY PROTECTION** None **EXPECT TO PAY** $30 **RELEASE** Out now **PUBLISHER** Aspyr Media **DEVELOPER** Action Forms **MULTIPLAYER** None **LINK** www.cryostasis-game.com **ESRB** M

Killing Floor

YOU'RE GOING TO NEED A MOP

Decapitating a naked invisible zombie with a fireman's axe in slow-mo was the best thing I did this month. *Killing Floor* pours satisfying moments like this one upon your screen (along with buckets of gore) with its simple, meant-for-multiplayer shooter gameplay. It may not be the most polished game ever, but it has the right priorities—zombies with chainsaw hands, kickass shotguns, generic metal music and six-person co-op—and it's a game you and a few buddies can pick up for some co-op action without investing a few hundred bucks between you.

Most of *Killing Floor*'s engine tech is right out of 2002 (much of the grimy, static lighting in the game looks like passes through your grandma's attic before entering the level), but that's fine—let *Left 4 Dead* be your Hollywood blockbuster, and *Killing Floor* be the B-movie you love with irony. But this isn't a budget *L4D*, as you might assume from the co-op zombie killing. Sure, you'll be attacked by a portly abomination (the Bloat) that spits toxic vomit, and the Siren, a witchlike, straitjacketed girl that uses a disorienting shriek to blur your vision—but remember, *Killing Floor* was originally a mod for *Unreal Tournament 2004* released in 2005, so it's definitely no rip-off.

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** A mod-made-retail co-op zombie shooter **INFLUENCED BY** The original 2005 *Killing Floor* mod, *Counter-Strike* **PLAY IT ON** Intel Core 2 Duo 2.2 GHz, 1GB RAM, GeForce 7800/ Radeon 3870 **ALTERNATIVELY** "Nazi Zombies" mode of *Call of Duty: World at War* (73%) **COPY PROTECTION** Steam **EXPECT TO PAY** $20 **RELEASE** Out now **PUBLISHER** TripWire/Steam **DEVELOPER** TripWire **MULTIPLAYER** Up to 6 players cooperatively **LINK** killingfloorthegame.com **ESRB** M

KF'S GAME MECHANICS ARE very straightforward, evoking the best of early 2000s shooters (run faster while you have your knife equipped!). Hop in one of five multiplayer maps, remove heads and limbs from shambling zeds, earn cash to buy weapons between rounds, repeat. Persistent perks, plenty of dismemberment and dynamic slow-mo are the best aspects—that last one rolls the game into crawling pace whenever it detects a dramatic moment like a double headshot or life-saving crossbow snipe. Since it's a co-op game, the slow-mo effect affects all players simultaneously, which is occasionally awesome but more often irritating.

The "perks" system (each round, you choose between six specializations—field medic, support, sharpshooter, commando, berserker and firebug) may be basic: You level your specializations to improve your damage with a shotgun, carrying capacity or your effectiveness with a welder (*KF*'s tool for adding hitpoints to doors). Investing in these ranks gives *KF* a thin layer of depth over its enjoyable disposability—you're here to gun down endless waves of ghouls, after all.

Aside from the end boss Patriarch (a teleporting zombie-cyborg with a chaingun arm), the default enemy AI plots a slow, autopiloted shamble to your location. Fleshpounds are the biggest challenge—hulky wanderers with augers for hands that charge you if you or a teammate shoots 'em too much—but the one-dimensional AI actually fits well within the accessibility, easy gore and pick-up-and-play feel of everything else.

Symptoms of zombification include hunger for brains and loss of genitals.

The other flaws are mostly expected quirks that come with a low-priced game: an awful interface for buying items between rounds, uninspired level design, boring grenades and only five maps available at release, but *Killing Floor* still manages to perform well within its narrow ambitions and forge something that's bloody playable. EVAN LAHTI

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

A budget game in the best way—guns, gore and functional co-op multiplayer with some old-school shooter charm, but hampered by the quirks and graphics of ancient engine tech.

0% BETTER >> 100% — 77%

++ GOOD ++

Shooting a Fleshpound too much enrages them—spacing your shots is the best strategy.

Above: Logan's slow-cooked to perfection, so the meat falls right off the bone. *Below:* He's got more execution moves than Texas. Also, unlockable comicbook costumes.

No matter how much he asks, never, ever give Wolverine a piggyback ride. It's a trick!

X-Men Origins Wolverine

LET LOGAN OFF OF HIS PG-13 LEASH

If there was ever a character who deserved a quality third-person action game, it's Wolverine. Shockingly, the opportunity to adapt Wolvie's solo feature film to game form hasn't been squandered. Though it's tied to the movie's inane, nonsensical plot, this game takes the kid gloves off when it comes to combat.

You fight as Wolverine should, leaping 50 feet through the air to gore an enemy with your claws, spinning to slash opponents on all sides, tossing soldiers around like rag dolls and jumping onto the backs of gargantuan bosses to stab away like a madman. Your repertoire of moves is extremely satisfying, thanks especially to fluid animations that give a great sense of impact to blows, along with the frequent impalements, dismembering of limbs and showers of blood reminiscent of *Kill Bill*. This is hyper-violence to a degree you'll never see in a PG-13 film—perhaps best exemplified by when Wolverine leaps onto the canopy of a helicopter, pulls the pilot out and shoves his head into the blades—but it's *exactly* what you'd expect from a guy with knives coming out of his hands.

One of Wolverine's key powers is the ability to immediately heal from any wound, making him one of the few characters for whom a magically recharging health bar actually makes sense. The game faithfully represents it by tearing off chunks of his flesh with every hit, exposing muscle and adamantium bone. Once out of combat for a few seconds, the wounds heal before your eyes. It's a very cool gimmick, even if you're moving too fast to see it most of the time.

OVER FIVE CHAPTERS, THE story very loosely follows the film, switching back and forth between America in the mid-1970s and a flashback to a mission in Africa three years prior. Africa is beset with a few too many Lara Croft-style block-pushing puzzles, and the enemies are a senseless mixture of machinegun-toting thugs, machete-wielding tribal warriors and giant lava demons—and no one thinks this is odd. The American missions are stocked with enemies better suited to Wolverine: robots, high-tech paramilitary soldiers and giant Hulk-like mutants (plus some bizarre four-armed ninja ladies that don't make *any* sense). Fights with major characters like Sabretooth, Gambit and The Blob are exhilarating highlights.

Five chapters might not sound like a whole lot, but it took me around 12 hours to chop through. If anything it's a bit too long, and the pacing would have benefitted from a few sharp cuts, including some of the repetitive miniboss battles and a handful of the puzzles (Wolverine fans want to stab things, not push blocks!).

I played through the entire game with mouse and keyboard (gamepads are also supported), and after remapping a couple of keys to mouse thumb buttons I was mashing away happily, seldom having to battle the camera—a rarity for a console-oriented action game—proving that the PC version is more than a mere afterthought. DAN STAPLETON

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** A third-person fighter based on the film, with brutal, bloody combat. **INFLUENCED BY** *God of War*, *X-Men* fanboyism. **PLAY IT ON** Core 2 Duo E8400, 2GB RAM, 512MB GeForce 8800GT/Radeon 4850 **ALTERNATIVELY** *Chronicles of Riddick: Assault on Dark Athena* (80%) **COPY PROTECTION** Requires disc in drive **EXPECT TO PAY** $40 **RELEASE** Out now **PUBLISHER** Activision **DEVELOPER** Raven **MULTIPLAYER** None **LINK** www.uncaged.com **ESRB** M

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

Wolverine's berserker rage isn't wasted in this stereotype-defying movie adaptation, even if it falls short in the plot-making-sense department.

0% BETTER >> 100% **79%**

++ GOOD ++

Loose lips sink ships, but 18-inch shells work so much faster.

Battlestations Pacific

TOKYO ROSE SAYS THIS WATERY WORLD WAR II SIM IS A LIMP AND LAZY SEQUEL. DON'T LISTEN TO HER LIES!

My favorite key on the keyboard at the moment? That would be E. Tap E while piloting a plane in *Pacific Fighters, Combat Flight Simulator 2*, or *1942: Pacific Air War* and nothing happens. Tap E while piloting a plane in *Battlestations: Pacific* and you're hurtled to the helm of a battleship, aircraft carrier, torpedo boat or sub.

This endearing action-strategy mermaid might not have the realism of a heavyweight sim, but its vehicular variety (always just a key press away) and instant accessibility are more than reasonable compensation. Two years on from *Battlestations: Midway*, Eidos Hungary has finally gotten around to the sequel. While not brimming with surprises, it does address a few of its forerunner's bigger flaws.

For starters there's about twice the campaign content. An artfully engineered Allied mission string picks up where *Midway* left off. Tarawa, Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima... this time you get to scrap all the way from the sultry South Pacific to the papery Japanese Home Islands. There are carriers and convoys to be clobbered, island defenses to be decimated, enemy flagships like the Yamoto to be transformed into eerie shark

Binoculars: twice as good as telescopes, half as good as quadoculars.

That looks ugly, Betty.

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** All your favorite WWII sims, simplified and rolled into one. Oh, and there's some strategy in there, too **INFLUENCED BY** *Battlestations: Midway, Carrier Command*, Hirohito's folly **PLAY IT ON** 3GHz CPU, 2GB RAM, 512MB GeForce 8800GT/Radeon 3850 **ALTERNATIVELY** *Men of War* (85%) **COPY PROTECTION** Keycode for singleplayer, login for multiplayer **EXPECT TO PAY** $50 **RELEASE** Out now **PUBLISHER** Eidos **DEVELOPER** Eidos Hungary **MULTIPLAYER** Up to 8 players via Games for Windows Live **LINK** www.battlestations.net **ESRB** T

tenements. The history is bruised but basically intact.

WELCOME SKIRMISH

The Imperial campaign starts in the air over a sleepy Hawaiian port called Pearl Harbor. As in the U.S. sequence, you're encouraged to experiment with the full gamut of war machines (50 per side) but ride rotation is never compulsory. Prefer to man nothing but flak guns until VJ Day? As long as you unroll the tactical map occasionally, giving friendly forces a little helping hand with RTS-style waypoint and targeting instructions, your chances of victory shouldn't be greatly diminished.

Where *Midway* had its standalone "challenge" missions, *Pacific* sports a welcome and well-thought-through skirmish mode. The differences between its five game types are magnified by map-specific setups. Play "Escort" on map three for instance, and you'll find yourself protecting or preying on a fleeing freighter convoy. Pick another venue and you might wind up chaperoning or intercepting a squad of C-47 transport planes, or savaging or screening an invasion flotilla of rocket ships and landing craft.

"Competitive" is a perverse form of co-op where, though you share the same foe as fellow players, your goal is to outperform them in the devastation stakes. "Siege" offers classic attack/defend situations. Both sides have a reservoir of supply points with which to replenish ravaged forces. The first party to exhaust their fund or lose their HQ is the vanquishee. Do you blow your budget on a handful of whopping warships, or invest in swarms of pesky divebombers and MTBs? Tactical options abound.

"Island Capture" is where I seem to have spent most of my skirmish time. Its logical grab-islands-to-gain-resource-generating-supply-depots-and-jumping-off-points-for-new-attacks dynamic sums up the Pacific War so succinctly, so enjoyably, you wonder why the devs didn't use it as the basis for a new campaign system.

Games For Windows Live-enabled multiplayer lets you enjoy the skirmish modes with buddies instead of bots. From my brief taste (and my experience of *Midway*'s MP) I'd be surprised if the lobbies weren't buzzing by the time this review appears. All those friends that refuse to play *IL-2, Silent Hunter* or *Red Orchestra* with you—this is the WWII game you can share with them. If they aren't instantly captivated, just tell them they aren't pressing the E key enough. TIM STONE

POWDER BURNS
No one-shot kills here, but a hit in the magazine will do massive damage.

STEEL NERVES
Ships can turn or go into reverse on spotting torps, so it pays to get close.

BLAZE OF GLORY
My wingman has had it. Still, at least he drew some of the flak off me.

SPECIAL DELIVERY

> This is the WWII game you can share with your friends

Cockpits are there for those who want them. No ship bridges though.

Attacking an undistracted battleship on your todd? Unwise.

One more hit should send this flat top to the bumpy bottom.

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

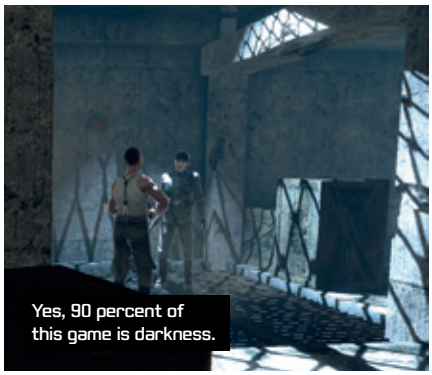
WWII playgrounds don't come much better equipped or more fun than this great blend of naval and dogfighting action.

0% BETTER >> 100% **80%**

++ GOOD ++

Yup, they're this dumb.

Velvet Assassin is about shiving Nazis in the back.


Yes, 90 percent of this game is darkness.

Velvet Assassin

THIS WORLD WAR II SNEAK-'EM-UP IS A MISGUIDED ABOMINATION, DELIVERING A KNIFE BETWEEN THE SHOULDER BLADES OF REAL HEROISM

Occasionally games go too far. As a connoisseur of digital violence I have no aversion to gore and brutality, but when a game tastelessly and talentlessly implicates a real-life heroine with its own failures, well, that's unacceptable.

Velvet Assassin is roughly based on real World War II secret agent Violette Szabo, who died a grotesque death at the hands of the Nazis, but it's no kind of memorial. It's a demented, lascivious mess.

Your initial, superficial impressions might be positive. The creeping-up-on-Nazis action seems solid, and the world—cranked up on a decent videocard—is extremely pretty. Things glisten in the sepia sunset, leaves drift from the trees. The presentation seems suitably grim, too. The dark soundtrack and rumbling ambient atmosphere is perfect for the dangerous infiltrations into the military underground. In the right game, all these would have been a major boon. But here they do little to paper over gaping cracks.

There's a time and a place for sexy game heroines.

CRUCIALLY, FOR A STEALTH game, the parameters for staying alive are horribly binary. Fail to get the kill right away and you will be very lucky to bungle your way out of danger, as you're able to in, say, *Hitman: Blood Money*. But here, making that kill is tricky at best, because using the manually aimed pistol is like trying to point at something with a frantic Labrador impaled on the end of a stick.

Whatever the nature of the alarm, even if it's just a few pixels of slumped guard, the other guards make a beeline for you. Unless you walk through a door, in which case they instantly forget anything ever happened. Soon you'll realize that executing the various guards in the exact formula provided is the only way you can expect to progress. It's not completely damnable—it works after a fashion—but it's ultimately no fun, and crippled by checkpoint saves.

The treatment of Ms. Szabo—aka Violette Summer—is even less forgivable. The real person was the subject of horrendous violations, yet she's depicted here as being a bit sexy in her lace nightie, even when dying, with Nazis looming over her.

Worse, the crucial "power" of the game makes some weird reference to the morphine that she would clearly never have received in real life. "Morphine time" is a bizarre rehash of tired old bullet-time, only with our heroine wandering through slow-drifting red particles in her nightdress, so that she can shiv a frozen German soldier in the neck.

Even without its massive design flaws this would be a galling game. But even if you don't take offense, its illogical stealthing means its not worth bothering with.

JIM ROSSINGNOL

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

A depressing and shoddy misfire of a World War II sneak-'em-up. Not much of a game, and even less of a memorial to a real heroine.

0% BETTER >> 100% **35%**

++ WEAK ++

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** World War II stealth game based on a real-life female agent. **INFLUENCED BY** *Theif*, *Hitman* **PLAY IT ON** 2.4GHz dual-core CPU, 512MB GeForce 8800GT/Radeon 3850, 2GB RAM **ALTERNATIVELY** *Hitman: Blood Money* (85%) **COPY PROTECTION** Steam **EXPECT TO PAY** $50 **RELEASE** Out now **PUBLISHER** SouthPeak **DEVELOPER** Replay Studios **MULTIPLAYER** None **LINK** velvetassassin.com **ESRB** M

Distract hungry flora with a bug sacrifice.

And Yet It Moves

DON'T LET THE HOMEMADE LOOKS FOOL YOU: THIS IS A SLICK, CHARMING AND CLEVER PIECE OF PLATFORMING PUZZLEMENT

Continuing a strong and very welcome trend of innovative and beautiful indie games in the past year (see *Braid* and *World of Goo*), *And Yet It Moves* combines torn-up paper and some serious fiddling with physics for great results.

At first glance it looks like a simple platformer, albeit one that's been ripped out of that stack of magazines your granddad used to keep in the shed. Your character runs and jumps across the captivating scenery looking out for checkpoints. The twist? You have to rotate the world to get to them. (*Twist, get it*? Oh, nevermind.)

HITTING LEFT OR RIGHT turns the level 90 degrees that way, and you can even rotate it when your character is in mid air, guiding his fall. For instance, if your character is trapped in front of a giant block of rock, rotate the screen and the steep sides will become flat planes for him to walk on. Need to get to something on the ceiling? Keep turning the screen until he falls onto it. New elements are introduced all the time too, so there's a new discovery on every level. Bouncy bamboo sticks are scattered about that you must use as springboards to leap to higher ground, and there are flames you can direct to burn through obstacles.

It sounds complicated, the sort of puzzle platformer that could have you strangling yourself with a spare USB cable, but the checkpoints are plentiful. It means the "punishment" for dying and having to retrace your steps is minimal, so you can afford to experiment to solve problems. The main dangers are falling too far, things falling on you and the cast of weird and wonderful foes that skulk about this world.

The enemy presence is minimal but memorable: long-tongued lizards, rock-chucking primates and a devil hamster. Getting rid of them is all about using the environment cleverly—feeding a surly chimpanzee a banana or distracting a giant carnivorous plant with a juicy bug. Sometimes these enemies are actually essential to your progress, like the demon hamster that chases you at a worrying speed but can also smash through rock barriers that lie in your path. As wall removal solutions go, a giant horned rodent has to be one of the best ever.

Consisting of 17 levels across three chapters, this is a short game, but it does come with extras. Finishing a section opens it up for competition mode where you can download other player's times in ghost form, and upload your speed runs to the leaderboard. There are achievements too, to keep compulsive collectors hooked.

Even with these extras it's more of a gaming snack than a main meal, but as snacks go, consider this gold-encrusted caviar. And at the snack-sized price, it's well worth checking out. RACHEL PENNY

Outlines are checkpoints, not where you died.

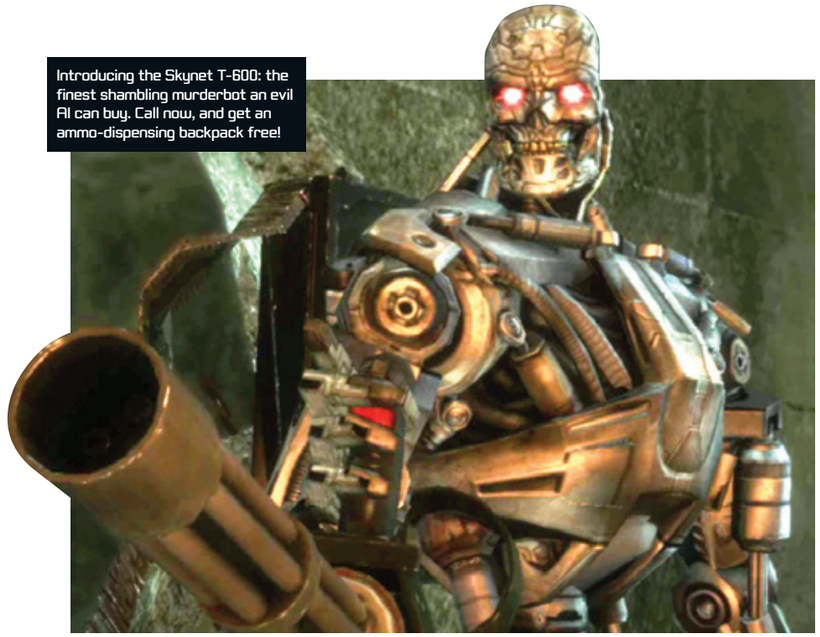
FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

A short but sweet platforming evolution that turns the genre upside down—literally—and features an intriguing and original art style.

0% BETTER >> 100% **86%**

++ GOOD ++

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** An indie puzzle platformer with a healthy disregard for physics. **INFLUENCED BY** *Portal*, scrapbooking **PLAY IT ON** 1.6GHz dual-core CPU, 1GB RAM, Intel GMA950 integrated graphics card **ALTERNATIVELY** *World of Goo* [93%] **COPY PROTECTION** None **EXPECT TO PAY** $15 **RELEASE** Out now **PUBLISHER** Broken Rules **DEVELOPER** Broken Rules **MULTIPLAYER** Online Leaderboards **LINK** Andyetitmoves.net **ESRB** N/A



Introducing the Skynet T-600: the finest shambling murderbot an evil AI can buy. Call now, and get an ammo-dispensing backpack free!

Terminator Salvation

YAWN CONNOR

If *Terminator Salvation* had a grandmother, she'd worry that it wasn't eating well. "Look at that scrawny-yet-indestructible endoskeleton," she'd say. "Five hours long? And only five types of evil robots to shoot at?

No additional modes or unlockable content? No bosses? My goodness, we need to get you some *dumplings*."

Being this bare-bones is an invitation to be ignored in a genre as crowded as the action shooter. The basic gameplay apes *Gears of War*—a post-apocalyptic world populated with shoulder-high concrete and debris that you can hide behind, then pop out of to shoot Skynet's mass-produced red-eyed robots. You play John Connor in his early resistance days (preceding the upcoming film), leading a band of bad voice actors across ruined Los Angeles on a rescue mission.

If these rebels are humanity's best hope for survival, we should just throw in the towel now, because they couldn't take out a toaster. "We've got to outsmart the machines! We've got to flank these guys!" they'll shout, hunkered comfortably behind a steel wall while your DNA is getting blended with futurebullets. Nearly all of your combat encounters consist of duck-rolling through points of cover so an ally can take aim at the chaingunning T-600, T-70 crab-walker or scout drone pinning you down, but these three machines make up 95 percent of your firefights; within an hour you've fought the same battle over and over against slightly different backdrops, and hours two through five are no different. There's simply too little variety here for a full-price release.

The exception to this are *Salvation*'s four on-rails sequences, one of which has Connor riding atop a jeep speeding on an LA highway, launching grenades at moto-terminators, Skynet's evil Harleys. But without bosses (in a universe crawling with doomsday droids? Really?), unconventional or interesting weapons, or setpieces that tip a hat to the films, there's scarcely anything sticking to *Salvation*'s ribs—the game needs a movie-like cinematic, a competent voice actor or more fan service to flesh out the story. Even an assault rifle that doesn't feel like a sputtering clarinet would've pushed it into average movie game territory.

Append an ending that may or may not include Connor activating the ol' sci-fi shortcut—an EMP pulse generated by *an Alienware laptop*—to sprint to easy victory, and you have a game that manages to offend both possible audiences: steely *Terminator* fans or casual action gamers looking for popcorn shooter. EVAN LAHTI

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** A third-person action game based on the film **INFLUENCED BY** *Wanted: Weapons of Fate*, short production deadlines **PLAY IT ON** Core 2 Duo 2.2 GHz, 2GB RAM, 256MB GeForce 7800/Radeon 3870 **ALTERNATIVELY** *Gears of War* [91%] **COPY PROTECTION** Disc must be in drive **EXPECT TO PAY** $50 **RELEASE** Out now **PUBLISHER** Warner Bros. Interactive **DEVELOPER** GRIN **MULTIPLAYER** Split-screen co-op, two players **LINK** terminatorsalvationgame.com **ESRB** T

If your on-rails scenes are a game's best asset, it's a bad sign. Turretin' down gunships is too easy.

Los Angeles' rubblelicious landscape doesn't bring any big setpieces, just crummy concrete.

They'll be back—the same five robots will attack you over and over during the game's short run.

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

Unbelievably repetitive. It performed bug-free for us, but *Salvation* has all the markings of a half-assed movie game hurried to retail to coincide with the movie date, and then some.

0% BETTER >> 100% **38%**

++ WEAK ++

The Last REMNANT

WITHOUT ENOUGH INNOVATION, THIS DOES LITTLE MORE THAN SCRATCH THE JRPG ITCH

So you cut my entire body off, boo hoo. Fight me, you wuss.

On a vast continent that doesn't quite understand feudalism, "remnants" are magical artifacts serving as tools, weapons and gods. When a growly voiced beardy man begins seizing them, only our hero, Rush, can save the day.

While the shop-for-swords, run-around-fields sections will remind you of everything else Square Enix has ever made, the turn-based combat in this Japanese RPG is more interesting. Each turn you're presented with a list of possible commands for each of your squads, based on their field position, morale, abilities and targets.

Yet initially these options are just variants of stabby-stabby, and it's a lukewarm experience at best. Thankfully, after 15 underwhelming hours your characters start learning interesting attacks and indirect spells, you can field more warriors and you're suddenly playing a lovely tactical RPG. You can lure enemies into position and nuke clusters of them at once, send a squad forward to absorb attacks on behalf of the party, flank foes for damage bonuses, and even tweak squad size and composition.

It's almost innovative. *The Last Remnant* takes too long to reveal that, though, and forgets to flaunt it. Increasingly, the awful plot leads you into face-offs against huge solitary monsters that can't be flanked or tricked. Your efforts at fielding a diverse, flexible force are rendered meaningless, and you wonder why you ever bothered. In a lazy attempt at buffing bosses, *TLR* betrays its saving grace.

It looked a lot like progress. Instead, we're back at Square One. JAZ MCDOUGALL

The boss battles are less fun than killing minions.

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

69%

++ FAIR ++

VITALS **PLAY IT ON** Core 2 Duo 2.4GHz, 2GB RAM, 512MB GeForce 8800GT/Radeon 4850 **EXPECT TO PAY** $40 **RELEASE** Out now **PUBLISHER** Square Enix **DEVELOPER** Square Enix **MULTIPLAYER** None **LINK** lastremnant-game.com **ESRB** M

Lensflare. Because we are of course, viewing this through a lens.

X-BLADES

HACK, SLASH, GUNS, DINOSAURS...YOU'LL FIND EVERYTHING EXCEPT FUN

Ayumi is a petulant manga-style treasure hunter, exploring third-person hack-'n'-slash ruins. I'd love to tell you more about her, but the mystifying (if pretty) cutscenes are a confusing jumble of nothingness.

Worry not, as this is about as generic an action game as you could imagine, the story only there to string together a series of temples and ruins in which you hit lots of things with a sword or some bullets. Because Ayumi has gun blades! Swords that are guns!

You pick up "souls," which are really XP. These can be spent on new skills—which are spells—and health and rage packs. Rage being mana. I see through your semantics, *X-Blades*. Repetitively, each location locks its exit until you've cleared all the baddies. And to a degree, that's fine. You hammer away with the main attack, fire bullets to take down flying creatures and unleash your powers for heftier damage. The trouble is, you do just this, with little challenge, over and over.

It's also buggy. One tiresome sequence requires that you perform a forward dive, a move Ayumi is only prepared to pull off at random. The environments are clippy, and the lock-on targeting would rather pick a distant invisible creature on the other side of a solid wall than the 14 currently trying to rip off your face.

But *X-Blades'* greatest crime is being dull. The explosions and spells look lovely, but the game itself is drudgery. Ayumi's abilities constantly grow, but are never applied in a novel way. When each new level feels about as interesting as doing the washing up, you may as well do that instead. JOHN WALKER

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

49%

++ MEDIOCRE ++

VITALS **PLAY IT ON** P4 2.4GHz, 1GB RAM, 256MB GeForce 7800/Radeon x1800 **EXPECT TO PAY** $30 **RELEASE** Out now **PUBLISHER** Southpeak **DEVELOPER** Gaijin Entertainment **MULTIPLAYER** None **LINK** x-blades.com **ESRB** M

CREATE NEW LEVELS FOR BRAID

BEND TIME AROUND YOUR LITTLE FINGER

BEND TIME AROUND YOUR LITTLE FINGER

We may have had to wait to get our hands on the PC version of *Braid*, but it was worth it. Not only do you get one of the finest puzzle games in history, but a full level editor. The only catch is that right now there's not much information, and getting it running can be a hairpulling experience.

GET STARTED

Difficulty: Medium
Time: 2 hours

VITAL LINKS

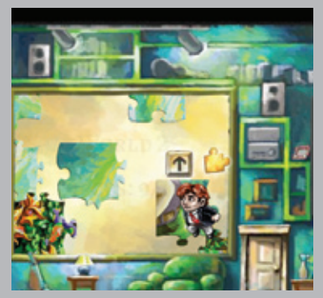
- The home of Braid snipurl.com/gkm36
- Braid creator Jonathan Blow's blog snipurl.com/gkm4i
- BraidMods, the unofficial home of Braid editing snipurl.com/gkm2f
- The fantastic official soundtrack snipurl.com/gkm5f

In a nutshell, you need to create a new "universes" folder to hold all user-made levels, then another within that named after your level—we'll use "pcgamer." Getting the base game data in there to work with is a little tricky, so do this step by step: **copy package0.zip and package.zip** from your Braid/data directory to the basic braid/ one, unzip both, **then copy the whole Data directory into your pcgamer folder**. Run the game with the command "Braid -editor -universe pcgamer -no_packages" and you're in.

Lost yet? The good news is that building a level is deceptively easy, and we'll show you how. Just remember, if you have trouble, you're not alone. Hit the links to the left for more advice and troubleshooting tips. As ever, it's a good idea to start very unambitious. Once you've made something playable, the impetus to learn how to do something more impressive is much stronger.

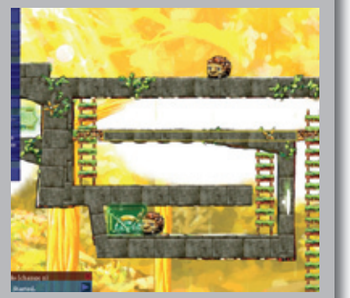
01 LOOSE ENDS

And that's it, you're done! Wait. Sorry. Too much time-warping. Having set up the game as above, load it, enter into the first world, and the first level. **Press F11 to open the Editor, and click New World**. Click Save As and type "world2-1." Tap F11 to leave the editor, quit the level, and hop back in. Don't worry—if you're looking at a black void, you're doing it right.



02 UNWINDING BRAID

Braid is a tricky game, and **what you think you're looking at isn't necessarily how the game works**. For starters, levels aren't made up of blocks clicked together to make platforms, but two different types of item: Pieces and Entities. Pieces are simply scenery, like cliffs and ledges. Entities cover everything from switches to cannons, giving the illusion of a working world.

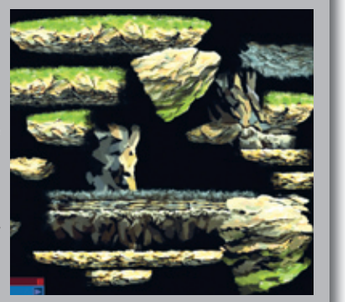


03 ENTER THE VOID

Let's make an entrance. This door is where Tim will enter the level. Click Entity Panel from the menu, and Deselect if it's showing anything. **Choose the Door item from the list and click Instantiate**. A block (not an actual door—that's added elsewhere) appears on the screen. It doesn't matter where you put this, but drag it around with the mouse.

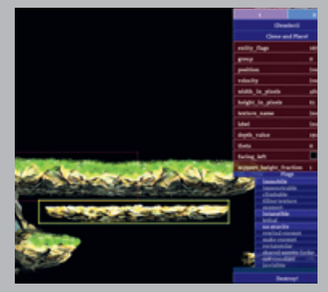
04 ROCKS AND CLIFFS

Let's create some cliffs and grassland. **Click Add Piece Config**, and type "ledges_and_caves02." You'll find all the sets in your Braid/Data/Pieces directory, with the extension "pi_set." All of the current Ledges and Caves set will be dumped onto the screen. **Click one and press CTRL-C to copy it, CTRL-V to paste it**. Note the translucent edges. These help you connect the pieces together in new ways.



05 FLIP AND TURN

You're not limited to one position. In the Entity Window, the option **facing_left lets you flip the object around**, and holding down the right mouse button lets you rotate it. Put together a ledge for Tim to land on, and another one a short distance away. You'll see other ways to play with Pieces in the list, including **Add and Multiply mode, which are useful for creating depth and backgrounds**.

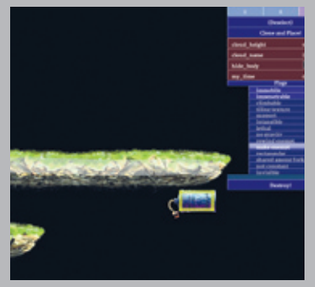


06 ALL FALL THROUGH

Try to run the level, and Tim...falls to his death. This is because all we've made is a picture of a ledge, not a ledge itself. **Open the Entity window, and choose Surface**. Instantiate it and drag it to the start of the ledge. **Pressing Tab to create new points, create a path across your ledge**. This will be invisible to the player, making it look like the grass graphics are holding Tim up. All green.

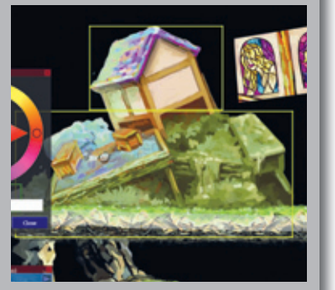
07 STORMY FUTURE

To get Tim to the second island, we'll set up a basic time puzzle. **Create a Cannon entity and place it at the end of your ledge**. In the Entity Window, **set it to Shot Type 3** (the clouds) and a suitable firing rate. Set up another one, but **click its Flags options and set it to be "Rewind Exempt."** Set the two up so that the player has to time their jump to make it across in safety, like the real game's Phase level.



08 PRETTY PARALLAX

Bored of that black void yet? Lets jazz it up. **Click Add Piece Config** and open up some more props—this one comes from "c5." Get one of the large background images and **assign it to a depth of 300 or so** in the Entities Editor—**the higher the number, the deeper it is**. Find something suitable, and use it to add some interesting background effects to at least one of your ledges.



09 SKY'S NO LIMIT

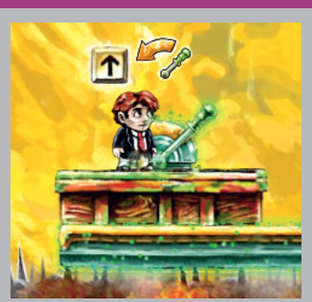
Further back, lets add one of those glorious *Braid* skies. These are a mix of drawn images (**a good starting point is the "leveltwo-newbackground04" Pieces set**) and overlaid objects. More complicated backgrounds can make use of animated elements, layers of parallax scrolling, and particle effects, as used in the game's opening screen to produce the game's title. For now though, we'll leave it simple.

10 TIM AND TIME

You're not restricted to just making new *Braid* levels. **By creating a Mod file in your universe directory, you can alter almost every variable in the game**, from making Tim jump further, to playing around with the time warping effects themselves. This is more than we have space to go into here, but Jonathan Blow's "sample" universe contains a good example of creating an alternate Tim.

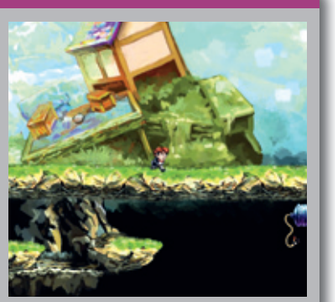
11 TIME OUT

Much of the editor and the items you have access to are still undocumented, but still important to know about. **Boosters for example are how *Braid* cheats when reversing time**—monsters being thrown into the air to higher platforms. Doors and switches are controlled by assigning each the same string. The more people we see making *Braid* mods, the more ingenuity we'll see.



12 LOOSE ENDS

And that's it, you're done! Wait, didn't we say that already? In any event, you've got a basic *Braid* level. It may not have much in the way of puzzle pieces, but you're able to run around, rewind time, and start making use of the tools available to create your own impossible puzzles. Check the resource links for information on actually sharing your maps, and finding other peoples' online.



HARD STUFF

WITH LOGAN DECKER

92

94

FRETLIGHT GUITAR

A ROCK LEGEND IS BORN!

You gotta start somewhere.

Everybody wants to play the guitar. The reason that everybody doesn't play guitar is because learning to play the guitar is *really hard*. I know what I'm talking about here. I bought my first guitar two decades ago and my playing is no better than when I began because I have little innate talent and never took lessons. Someone must have told Rusty Shaffer at Optek about that, because he showed up at *PC Gamer* with the electric FG-421 Fretlight Guitar and some bold claims about what it could do for even lazy nerds like myself.

First, knock "teaching guitar" out of your thoughts right away—the Fretlight Guitar itself is a reasonably priced sturdy Stratocaster clone with a double-action truss rod (for adjusting the neck tension), two single-coil pickups and a humbucker (a special double-coil pickup that produces a cleaner signal). But in addition to the standard 1/4-inch jack, it also has an output that connects the Fretlight to your PC via a proprietary cable (the jack looks like a MIDI port, but it's not). Fire up the Fretlight's software, and embedded LEDs in the fretboard—invisible when not in use—light up to show you which notes and chords to play. We're off to a great start.

The Fretlight Guitar is bundled with the creaky-looking Fretlight Lesson Player software that includes 31 basic lessons, as well as a chord and scale library (additional lesson packs are available through the Fretlight store). You also get *demo* versions of other Fretlight apps: The Improvisor helps you play along to 125 songs by lighting up notes in the song's key signature, for example, and the Video Player lets you not only play along to video lessons, but also slow them down and even loop sections of the tutorial—it's the centerpiece of the Fretlight System.

MY BIGGEST COMPLAINT with the system isn't with the demo software; the guitar and the lessons seem reasonably priced, and most lessons would take (me) months to master, so it's not as if money is flying out the window. Instead, what the Fretlight needs is to be able to send a signal back to the software, so that the software can track your progress (that's coming in a future model, I'm told).

Actually, what I'm really looking for is a guitar that plays itself and makes me look good doing it. Failing that, I want a guitar that helps me learn on my own time and at my own pace, and there's only one way to find out if the Fretlight can do that, and at what cost. I'll be practicing a minimum of two hours a week with the Fretlight system, every week, for the next six months, with regular updates on the *PC Gamer* podcast (www.pcgamerpodcast.com) and Twitter (ARockLegend) throughout. And my final verdict will be rendered in our Holiday issue. Stay tuned, and pray for me and my neighbors.

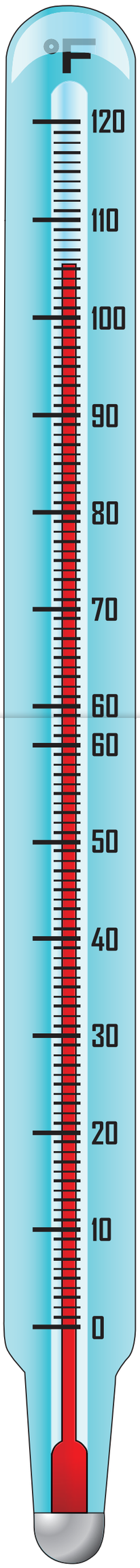
VITALS **URL:** WWW.FRETLIGHT.COM
MSRP: FROM $399.95 **CATEGORY:** ROCKTACULAR

HACKER HAT BY GEEK CULTURE, WWW.GEEKCULTURE.COM

THE HOTTEST HARDWARE

HOW FIRED UP IS YOUR RIG?

ALTHOUGH UPGRADING YOUR VIDEOCARD and CPU should involve more than just picking the latest and fastest models—you'll also want to consider features, bundled games and price, for example—performance is still king in a gaming PC. So we've compared virtually every single consumer videocard and processor on the market today in the chart on these two pages, which you can use as a reference and upgrading guide. Begin by looking up your current hardware, and if you find that you're falling too far down the scale, it's time to heat things up in your rig.



GPUs

The new speed king combines two GTX 260 boards into one card. Surprisingly, this beast only requires one six-pin and one eight-pin PCI-E power cable.

Geforce GTX 295
Radeon HD 4890 X2
Radeon HD 4870 X2
Geforce GTX 285
Radeon HD 4850 X2
Geforce GTX 280
Radeon HD 4890
Geforce GTX 275

55nm version of the Core 216

Geforce GTX 260 Core 216SP

Geforce GTX 260 Core 216

Geforce GTX 260

Replaced the GTX 260

Radeon HD 4870
Geforce 9800 GX2

AMD's top single-GPU videocard resides at the intersection of peak performance and affordable pricing.

Radeon HD 4770

Geforce GTS 250
Geforce 9800 GTX+
GeForce 8800 Ultra
Geforce 9800 GTX
GeForce 8800 GTX
Radeon HD 4850
Geforce 9800 GT
GeForce 8800 GTS 512
Geforce 8800 GTS

Best $100 graphics card

GeForce 8800 GT

Geforce 9600 GT
Radeon HD 3870

Actually just a rebadged 9800GTX+ based on the G92 architecture, but with a smaller board.

GeForce 7950GX2
GeForce 8800GTS 320/640
Radeon HD3850
Radeon X1950XTX
Radeon X1950 XT
Radeon HD2900 XT
GeForce 7950GT
Radeon X1900 XTX
GeForce 7900GTX
Radeon X1900 XT
Radeon X1900
Radeon X1800 XT
Radeon X1800 XL
GeForce 7900GTO
Radeon X1800 GTO
GeForce 7900GT
Radeon HD2900 Pro

This card delivers incredible performance for its price, almost equalling the best here. Unless you're playing on a 30-inch monitor, the framerate difference between this and an Ultra just isn't worth worrying your pretty head about.

GeForce 8600GTS
GeForce 7900GS
GeForce 7800GTX
GeForce 7800GT
GeForce 7800GS
Radeon X850 XT
Radeon HD2600 XT
GeForce 8600GT
Radeon X850 Pro
Radeon X800 XT
Radeon X800 XL
Radeon X800 GT
Radeon HD2600 Pro
GeForce 7600GT
GeForce 6800Ultra

You'll need at least an Nvidia 8-series GPU if you want to take advantage of CUDA features like accelerated PhysX and video encoding.

Two chips on one card, but they're not DX10 capable and rely on sometimes iffy SLI drivers.

Radeon 9800 XT
Radeon 9800 Pro
Radeon 9800
Radeon X1650 XT
Radeon X1600 XT
Radeon 9700 Pro
Radeon 9700
GeForce 6800GT
GeForce 6800GS
GeForce 6800GTO
Radeon X800 Pro
GeForce 6800
GeForce 6800XT
GeForce 6800LE
GeForce 7600GS
Radeon 9600XT
GeForce 6600GT
Radeon X1600 Pro

There are a lot of cards here spanning several generations of hardware, yet performance between them all is pretty much identical in modern games. Don't switch from one of these chaps to another—it's just not worth it.

3D cards below this point may well boast high levels of DirectX ability, but are hampered by low memory bandwidths and data processing ability to the point of being near useless for games.

GeForce 6600
Radeon X600 Pro
Radeon 9600 Pro
GeForce 6600LE
GeForce 8500GT
Radeon 9600LE
Radeon HD2400 XT
GeForce 8400GS
Radeon HD2400 Pro
GeForce 7300GT
Radeon X1300
Radeon HD2350
Radeon 9550
GeForce 7300GS
GeForce 7200GS
GeForce 7100GS
GeForce 6200
GeForce 6150LE
GeForce 6100

CPUs

Core i7 965 Extreme Edition
Core i7 940

The best of the best. Intel's fastest consumer CPU shatters benchmark records and is an overclocker's dream, if you can afford it.

Core i7 920
Core 2 Extreme QX9775
Core 2 Extreme QX9770

The preferred Core-i7 processor for high-end gamers—easily overclocked past 3GHz with a third-party air cooler.

Core 2 Extreme QX9650
Core 2 Quad Q9650
Core 2 Quad Q9550
Phenom II X4 955 Black Edition
Phenom II X4 945

Phenom II X4 940 Black Edition
Phenom II X4 910
Phenom II X4 920
Phenom II X4 810
Core 2 Quad 9450
Core 2 Extreme QX6850
Core 2 Extreme QX6800
Core 2 Duo E6850
Core 2 Extreme X6800
Core 2 Extreme QX6700
Core 2 Quad Q6700
Core 2 Quad Q9300
Core 2 Duo E6750
Core 2 Duo E6700

Compared to the performance of the Core i7 family of procs, only a fool would pony up a grand for it.

Core 2 Quad Q6600
Phenom II X3 720 Black Edition
Phenom II X3 710
Phenom X4 9950 Black Edition
Phenom X4 9850 Black Edition
Phenom X4 9850
Phenom X4 9750
Phenom X4 9650
Core 2 Duo E8600
Core 2 Duo E8500
Phenom X3 8750
Phenom X3 8650
Core 2 Duo E6600
Athlon 64 X2 6400+
Core 2 Duo E6550
Athlon X2 6000+

AMD's top-end CPU can't compete with Intel's finest in terms of speed. But for its admirable performance, you can't beat it's sub-$200 price.

Phenom 9600+
Phenom 9500+
Athlon 64 X2 5800+
Core 2 Duo E6420
Core 2 Duo E6400
Athlon 64 X2 5600+
Athlon 64 X2 5400+
Athlon 64 X2 5200+
Athlon 64 FX-74
Athlon 64 FX-72
Pentium D EE 965
Pentium D 960
Athlon 64 FX-70
Core 2 Duo E6300
Athlon 64 FX-62
Athlon 64 X2 5000+
Athlon 64 FX-60
Pentium D EE 955
Pentium D 950
Core 2 Duo E4600
Athlon 64 X2 4800+
Core 2 Duo E4500
Core 2 Duo E4400
Core 2 Duo E4300
Athlon 64 X2 4600+
Pentium D EE 840
Athlon 64 X2 4400+
Athlon 64 X2 4200+
Athlon 64 X2 4000+
Athlon 64 X2 3800+
Athlon 64 X2 3600+

One of our favorite chips looks a long way down the list, but don't be misled: the performance differences between here and the top are minimal.

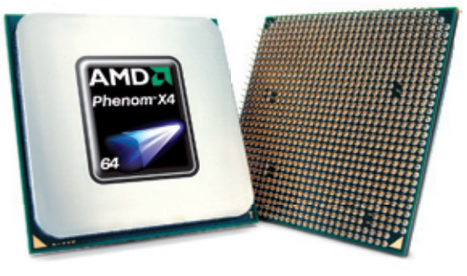
A tough start for AMD's new chip, but sooner or later the four core advantage will push it clear of the older Athlons.

Athlon 64 4000+
Athlon 64 FX-55
Athlon 64 3800+
Pentium D 945
Pentium D 840
Pentium D 820
Pentium 4 3.8GHz
Athlon 64 3700+
Athlon 64 FX-57
Pentium 4 3.6GHz
Pentium D 940

There are some serious bargains to be had around this part of the thermometer. If you're self-building or upgrading from an older machine this is where those on a tight budget should start.

Athlon 64 FX-53
Athlon 64 FX-51
Pentium D 930
Athlon 64 3600+
Athlon 64 3500+
Athlon 64 3400+
Pentium D 830
Pentium 4 3.4GHz
Pentium 4 3.2GHz
Pentium D 805
Pentium D 925
Athlon 64 3200+
Pentium 4 3.06GHz
Pentium D 920
Pentium D 915
Pentium 4 3.0GHz
Athlon 64 3000+
Athlon 64 2800+
Athlon XP 3200+
Pentium 4 2.8GHz
Pentium 4 2.6GHz
Athlon XP 2800+
Pentium 4 2.4GHz

Once the best of the best—even the fastest single core CPUs are struggling to keep up with modern games. If you're lucky, though, your motherboard will accept a cheap dual core upgrade. The FX chips of this generation, however, used the server spec socket 940, which you'll struggle to find an upgrade for.



WD TV

DRIVE-UP THEATER

PC GAMER EDITORS' CHOICE

Getting movies, music and photos onto your HDTV doesn't have to mean buying an extra PC for the living room, a weekend with Cat-5 cable and a staple gun, or the tragedy of trying to stream high-definition video over a wireless network. Expense, frustration, failure.

But how about this: load up movies, music and photos onto an external hard drive or flash drive, plug the drive into your HDTV via the WD TV, and kick back with a bowl of Bacon Salt-covered popcorn. That's the good life.

Takes hi-def wherever you want it to go.

It's basically a media decoder and remote control in a glossy black box the size of a very large slice of lasagna, but it distinguishes itself with a slick HD menu system and by the vast array of formats it supports. Not just MP3 at 320Kbps, TIFF photos and MPEG4 video, but FLAC audio, 1080p MKV files, and even SRT subtitles! The short version is that if your transcoding application can create it, the WD TV will almost certainly play it (the device connects via HDMI or composite cables, and includes an optical out for audio). It's not Western Digital's fault that the WD TV won't play copy-protected media (including iTunes media), but it could have avoided annoying everybody by not including an HDMI cable.

VITALS URL: WWW.WDC.COM MSRP: $129.99
CATEGORY: DREAM

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

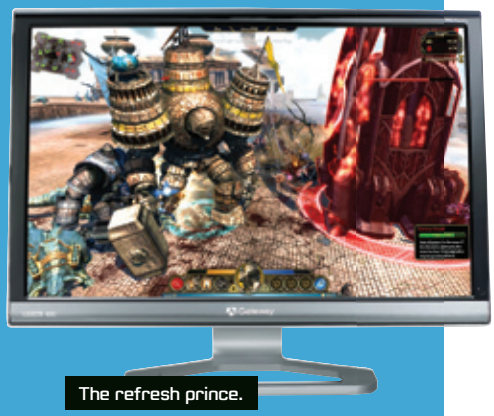
0% BETTER >> 100% 90%

++ EDITORS' CHOICE ++

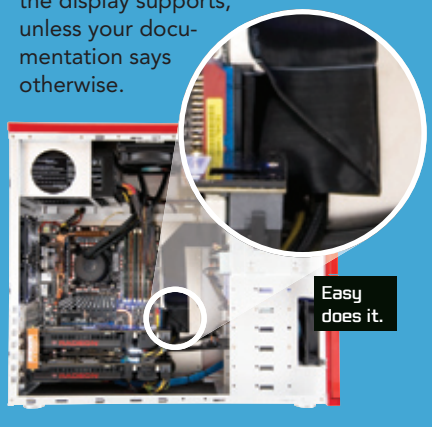
Q&A: PC's little mysteries

Q: Why does my LCD have a refresh rate? I thought that only applied to CRTs. M. KAO

A: You're right, it does. A CRT's refresh rate describes the frequency at which the display hardware redraws an image on the screen in a single second. LCDs don't need to do this; once an image is drawn, it stays there until changed. But you still see refresh rate reported on some Properties tabs. In this case, it means how frequently your videocard sends a new image to your display. Always leave it at 60Hz, or the highest setting the display supports, unless your documentation says otherwise.



The refresh prince.



Easy does it.

Q: Do crimped or taped-down cables slow down performance at all? JASON BUCKLEY

A: While I've seen plenty of problems caused by faulty or broken cables, I've never observed a folded cable make a discernible difference in performance. As long as you fold or twist them gently, they, and you, should be just fine.

HARD STUFF TRINITY

DREAM SYSTEM		MID-RANGE		ENTRY-LEVEL	
CASE AND PSU		CASE AND PSU		CASE AND PSU	
COOLER MASTER COSMOS; 850W PSU	$322	NZXT ALPHA; OCZ GAMEXSTREAM 850W PSU	$219	GENERIC CASE; CORSAIR 450W PSU	$135
PROCESSOR		PROCESSOR		PROCESSOR	
INTEL CORE i7-965 3.2GHZ	$994	INTEL CORE I7-940	$557	AMD ATHLON X2 6000+ 3.1GHZ	$77
MOTHERBOARD		MOTHERBOARD		MOTHERBOARD	
ASUS P6T DELUXE V2	$307	ASUS P6T	$238	ASUS M2N-MX	$49
MEMORY		MEMORY		MEMORY	
CORSAIR 6GB DDR3-1333	$100	CORSAIR 3GB DDR3-1333	$50	CORSAIR 2GB DDR2-800	$33
OPTICAL DRIVE		OPTICAL DRIVE		OPTICAL DRIVE	
LG GGC-H20L BLU-RAY	$105	LITE-ON DH-52C2P	$32	LITE-ON DH-52C2P	$32
HARD DRIVE		HARD DRIVE		HARD DRIVE	
INTEL X25-M 80GB SSD; WD 500GB 7200RPM	$430	WD 500GB 7200RPM	$50	WD 250GB 7200RPM	$40
SOUNDCARD		SOUNDCARD		SOUNDCARD	
CREATIVE LABS X-FI TITANIUM	$107	ONBOARD	$0	ONBOARD	$0
VIDEOCARDS		VIDEOCARD		VIDEOCARD	
GEFORCE GTX 295	$499	GEFORCE GTX 280	$268	GEFORCE 8800 GT	$88
	$2,864		$1,419		$454

CHEX QUEST: NEVER FORGET

Chex Warrior: an elite trooper sent by the Federation of Cereals to counter an alien threat to vital Chex research laboratories and facilities.

If you reached your hand into a box of Chex cereal in 1996, you may have grasped one of the most beloved *Doom* mods ever made—*Chex Quest*, a free advergame commissioned by General Mills to associate its unsugared cereal with high-tempo intergalactic combat. To a breakfasting youth not tall enough to board the demon-ventilating *Doom* rollercoaster, donning the wheat-checkered armor of the Chex Warrior was a mom-friendly substitute—you weren't buckshotting Mars demons, just "zorching" anthropomorphic boogers back to their own dimension.

CQ is still a cherished blip in my gaming development; my cousin and I single-player co-oped (sharing a keyboard, one of us shot and opened doors while the other moved) the game for hours. Your melee weapon? *A spoon* (that could be upgraded to a spork-tazer). Your chaingun? An electro-zapper spinning with red bolts. Healthy vegetables, fruit and water were the palette-swapped versions of armor shards and health.

They may not actually kill anything, but *CQ*'s shiny sci-fi "zorchers" feel better than many modern SMGs and assault rifles.

Chex Quest lives on in a handful of active fan communities (like http://chexquest.org) that have contributed multiplayer mods and other .wads, but also through some of the game's original creators. *Chex Quest* lead artist Chuck Jacobi (now an artist at EA LA on *Command & Conquer: Red Alert 3* and other titles) released *Chex Quest 3* last year, a pet project that recaptures the colorful camp of the original.

For Jacobi, *Chex Quest* was his first foray into game development. "I was huge fan of *Doom*. With my co-worker Scott Holman, we made mods in our spare time as a creative release. Getting the chance to make a game was like a gift from God at the time. I think the biggest reason it was successful and remains playable to this day is that the game is still *Doom*. The colorful art and goofy sounds made it a hit with kids for sure, but its enduring quality is that it is fun to play."

Even laden in breakfast branding (level two finds the Chex Warrior gunning Flemoids in a Chex warehouse; health pickups include a "supercharged breakfast"), *CQ* manages to emit so much charm while being soggy with marketing, and this is sure credit to the original team's talent for creating lively levels, weapon animations and art and slotting them in a fun, all-ages context. "We simply put a disguise on an already excellent game," Jacobi says.

PC GAMER

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